CLASSICOLOURS

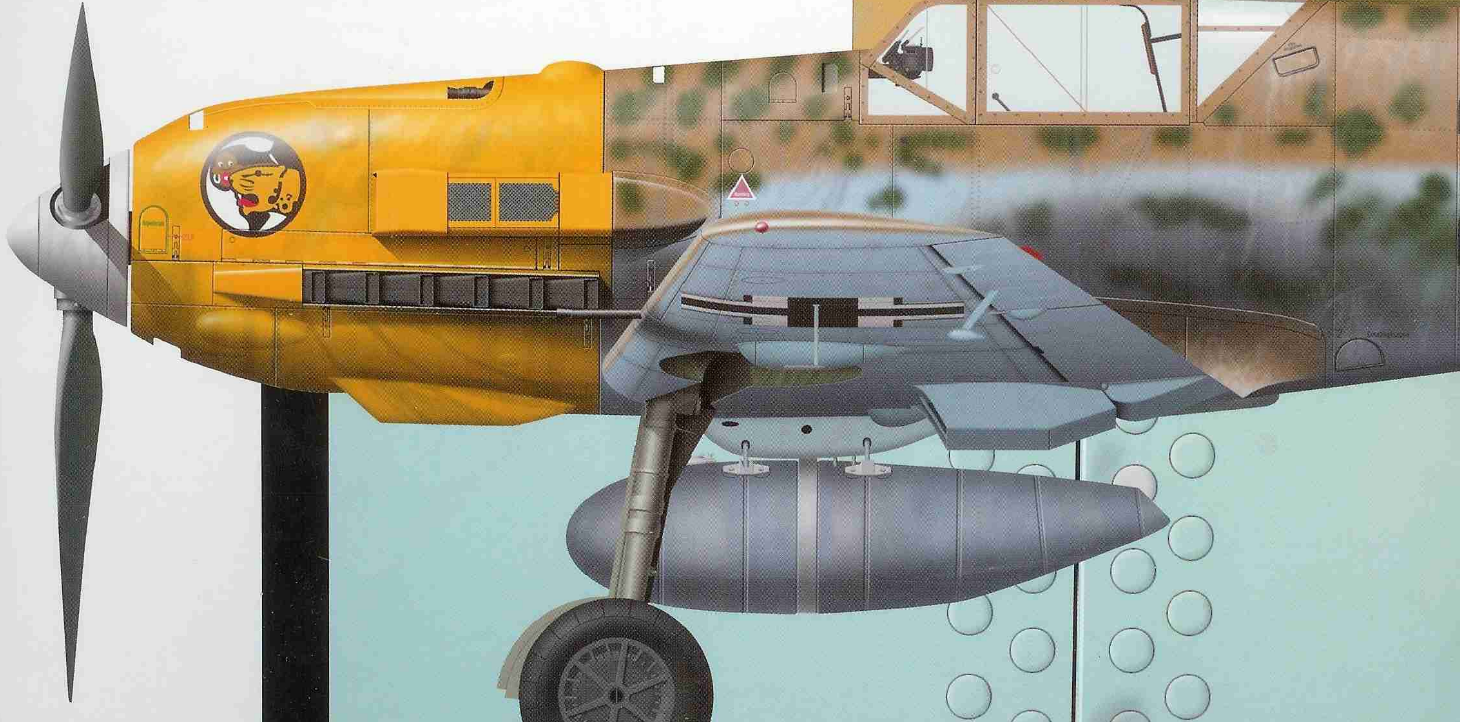
LUFTWAFFE COLOURS
Volume Three Section 3

JAGDWAFFE

J. Richard Smith
& Martin Pegg

WAR OVER THE DESERT

North Africa
June 1940-June 1942



WAR OVER THE DESERT

1940
1942

The situation in the Mediterranean area, where England is employing superior forces against our allies, requires that Germany should assist for reasons of strategy, politics, and psychology.

I therefore order as follows:

1. *Commander-in-Chief Army will provide covering forces sufficient to render valuable service to our allies in the defence of Tripolitania, particularly against British armoured divisions. Special orders for the composition of this force will follow.*
2. *X. Fliegerkorps will continue to operate from Sicily. Its chief task will be to attack British naval forces and British sea communications between the Western and Eastern Mediterranean.*

In addition, by use of intermediate airfields in Tripolitania conditions will be achieved for immediate support of the Graziani Army Group by means of attack on British port facilities and bases on the coast of Western Egypt and in Cyrenaica…

Extract from Hitler's War Directive No 22:
German Support for Battles in the Mediterranean Area.
11 January 1941

June 1940-January 1941

The Background

For some time prior to the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, had coveted the British and French possessions in North and East Africa. Their capture would enable him to link the colony of Libya, which had been an Italian possession since 1912, with Eritrea and Abyssinia, the latter having been invaded by Italy in 1935.

Mussolini looked upon the German victories in Europe during the first half of 1940 with envy and, unable to resist the opportunity to take a share of the Nazi successes, declared war on Britain and France on 10 June 1940. The problem was that although Italy possessed a large and modern navy, its army was badly led and poorly equipped, and much of its 3,000 strong air force, the *Regia Aeronautica*, was largely furnished with obsolete aircraft.

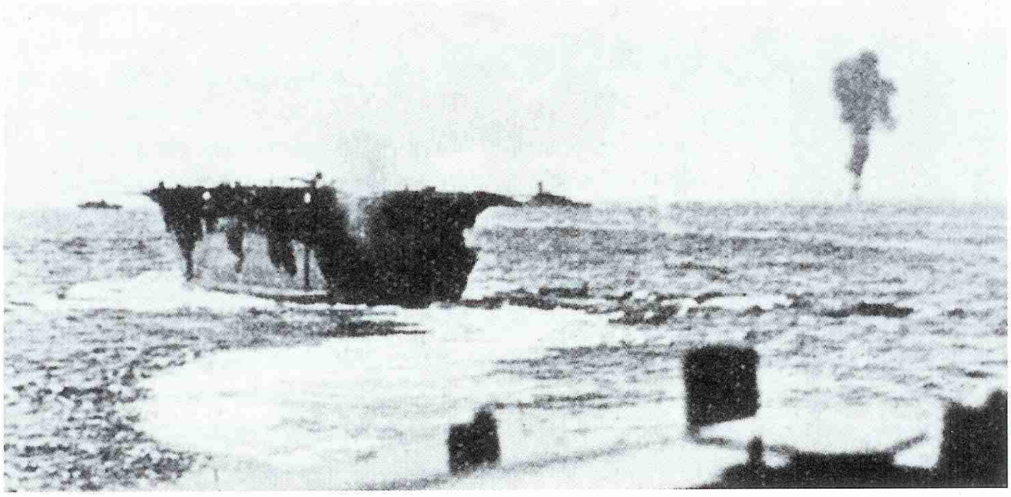
RIGHT: On 10 June 1940, when the Western campaign was almost over, Italy declared war on France and Britain. Hitler and the impetuous and inept Mussolini met in München to discuss the terms of the proposed French armistice and are pictured here inspecting a guard of honour outside München railway station. In September 1940, Italy invaded Egypt and a month later attacked Greece. In both cases Italian forces were defeated and Hitler was obliged to send German forces to intervene.

Italy's first offensive action was to mount a futile and inglorious offensive on the western Alpine front of France, which was to result in the first resounding demonstration of the Italian Army's unreadiness for combat. A day later, on 11 June, units from the *Regia Aeronautica* launched their first attack on the strategically important island of Malta, a Royal Navy base in the centre of the Mediterranean. At the same time, RAF Blenheims attacked Italian aircraft on the ground at El Adem, an important airfield in Italian-owned Libya guarding the approaches to the port of Tobruk. Fiat CR.42s from the *Regia Aeronautica* claimed to have shot down three Blenheims, but several Italian aircraft were also destroyed.

During the next few months, Italian air and ground forces skirmished inconclusively on the Libyan-Egyptian border with those of Britain and it was not until 13 September that Marshall Rodolfo Graziani, commander in chief of Italian forces in North Africa, felt ready to launch a major operation into Egypt. Advancing across the border, the Italians quickly took Sollum and then moved forward to Sidi Barrani where they dug in.

BELOW: The Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in Libya.

On the ground, there was then another period of inactivity with the two armies facing each other along a north-south line just east of Sidi Barrani. In the air, however, there was considerable activity with some major clashes between the RAF and the *Regia Aeronautica*. Finally, on 9 December, British and Commonwealth forces under General Sir Archibald Wavell launched a major counter-attack, supported by increasing numbers of Hurricane fighters and Blenheim bombers. By the evening of the 11th, British and Indian troops had re-captured Sidi Barrani and taken 38,000 Italian prisoners, 237 guns and 73 tanks for the loss of only 624 killed, wounded or missing. Four days later, Italian forces



LEFT: In August 1940, 12 Hurricanes aboard HMS Argus were flown off to Malta from a position south of Sardinia. It was the first of many such operations by British and, later, American carriers by which Malta was eventually to be given the means to defend itself. HMS Argus was a former liner converted into an aircraft carrier and figured in several of the actions in which Hurricanes and later Spitfires were flown off to aid the island's defences. She is pictured here taking violent evasive action during an air attack.

were expelled from Egypt, and on 3 January Australian troops launched an attack on Bardia on the Libyan border which they quickly overran. On 22 January the fortified port of Tobruk also fell to the Australians, followed by Derna at the end of the month.

Meanwhile, constant air battles were taking place over Malta. Initially the defence of the island was limited to four Gladiator biplanes and a small number of anti-aircraft guns. Early in August 1940, 12 Hurricanes were flown to Malta from the aircraft carrier HMS *Argus*, but this still left the defending air forces woefully inferior in number to the large quantities of Italian aircraft based in Sicily. On 5 September, Italian units which had just re-equipped with German Ju 87 B dive-bombers, struck at the island for the first time. Two days later, ten SM.79s bombed Valetta and, on 18 September, SM.79s escorted by C. 200s on their first operational sortie, bombed Hal Far airfield. There were only two more raids in October, but on 8 November, five SM.79s attacked the seaplane base at Kalafrana.

Despite this harassment, on 9 November the British aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* was able to launch an attack on Sardinia, providing diversionary cover for a large-scale assault on the Italian fleet in Taranto harbour on the night of 11/12 November. Following reconnaissance by Malta-based Marylands and Sunderlands, an attack by 21 Swordfish aircraft from the carrier HMS *Illustrious* crippled three Italian battleships and damaged several cruisers. It was a blow from which the Italian fleet took a long time to recover.

Fifteen SM.79s bombed Malta on 23 November and only one raid was flown against the island in December. During its seven months of operations against Malta, the *Regia Aeronautica* had lost a total of 23 bombers and 12 fighters, with a further 187 bombers and seven fighters damaged.

The severe reverses suffered by Italian forces, not only in North Africa and Taranto, but also in Greece, threw the Italian leadership into near chaos and was an enormous embarrassment and a plight which Germany could not ignore. Late in December, although unwilling to become directly involved in the Middle East, Hitler ordered the transfer of a small air fleet, the X. *Fliegerkorps* under *Generalleutnant* Hans Geisler, from Norway to Sicily, and two *Panzer* divisions were ordered to North Africa. Shortly afterwards, 65 Ju 52/3m transports left Germany for Foggia in southern Italy to ready the bases for operations in January 1941. News that a large British convoy was on its way to Alexandria via Malta hastened these preparations and on 9 January reconnaissance showed that the British convoy, spearheaded by the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* and the battleships *Warspite* and *Valiant*, was within range of Sicily. The next day the convoy was attacked by 18 He 111s from II./KG 26. This strike was unsuccessful, but two hours later 13 Ju 87s from II./St.G 2 managed to hit *Illustrious* with six 500 kg bombs and all but sank the carrier. She managed to limp towards Valetta harbour under constant attack by the *Luftwaffe*. Further attacks on the carrier by X. *Fliegerkorps'* aircraft followed, but not without loss to the German forces. During one particular strike, 2./St.G 1 lost all its crews except the *Staffelkapitän*.

At this time, the only German day fighter unit based in the area was III./ZG 26 equipped with the Bf 110, but soon the decision was taken to transfer a Bf 109 E *Staffel*, 7./JG 26, to Sicily. A 40-man detachment from the unit's ground staff left Wevelgem in Belgium for Italy in Ju 52/3ms on 22 January and were soon joined in Rome by 12 pilots each flying a brand-new Bf 109 E-7/N. The 22-year-old *Oblt*. Joachim Müncheberg, who had already been awarded the *Ritterkreuz* in September 1940, led the *Staffel*. Apart from Müncheberg and *Oblt*. Klaus Mietusch however, 7./JG 26 was made up mainly of inexperienced pilots, 13 of its 'old guard' having been killed during the Battle of Britain.

Luftwaffe Operations Against Malta

> ***"At about 9.15, we were ordered to scramble. We climbed to 20,000 ft. We were still climbing over Luqa when six Me 109s screamed down on us out of the sun. We immediately broke away and formed a rather wide circle. Just as I took my place in the circle I saw four more Messerschmitts coming down out of the sun. I turned back under them, and they overshot me. I looked round very carefully, but could see nothing, so turned back onto the tail of the nearest Hun who was chasing some Hurricanes in front of him. We were all turning gently to port, so I cut the corner and was slowly closing in on the Hun. I was determined to get him, and must have been concentrating so intently on his movements that, like a fool, I forgot to look in the mirror until it was too late. Suddenly there was a crash in my cockpit – bits and pieces flew everywhere. Instinctively I went into a steep spiral dive, furiously angry that I had been beaten at my own game. My left arm was dripping blood, and when I tried to raise it only the top part moved, the rest hung limply by my side. Everything happened so quickly that I have no very clear recollection of what actually took place."***
>
> *Diary of Flt.Lt. James MacLachlan,*
> *Hurricane pilot with 261 Squadron shot down by*
> *Oblt. Joachim Müncheberg of 7./JG 26.*
> *16 February 1941*

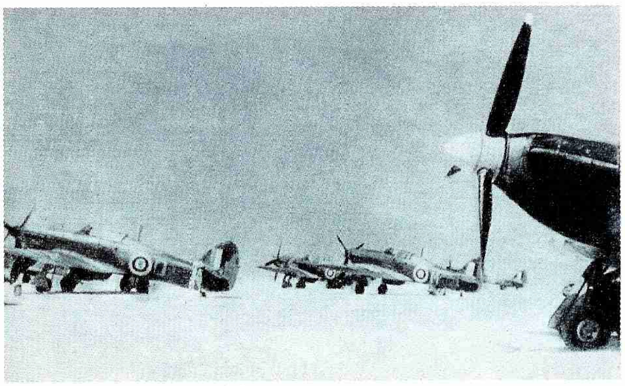
On 9 February, 7./JG 26 left Italy for its new operational base at Gela in Sicily and flew its first operational sorties over Malta three days later. During these, it claimed the destruction of three Hurricanes from 261 Sqn., one by Müncheberg, and two by *Fw.* Leibing. On 16 February, a *Schwarm* of Bf 109s from 7./JG 26 flew escort for II./St.G 2's Ju 87s attempting to bomb Luqa airfield. Eight Hurricanes from 261 Sqn. attempted to intercept, but were attacked from above by the Messerschmitts. Three British fighters were shot down, two by Müncheberg (including MacLachlan's mentioned above), for no loss to the Germans.

The Bf 109 E-7/N, powered by the 1,175 hp DB 601 N engine, had a maximum speed of over 570 km/h (354 mph), about 80 km/h (50 mph) faster than the Hurricane I. In addition, JG 26's tactics, honed during the Battle of Britain, were far superior. Müncheberg's fighters would wait at high altitude for the Hurricanes to appear, dive on them and then zoom back, avoiding any opportunity in which the British fighters could use their excellent manoeuvrability. Lacking similar experience in the Battle of Britain, the RAF pilots were still flying in outdated tight Vee formations, whereas the Germans were using the loose group of four pioneered in Spain and continued ever since.

A major *Luftwaffe* attack was flown against Luqa on 26 February when the airfield was put out of action for 48 hours. 7./JG 26 claimed the destruction of four Hurricanes on this day and damaged three Fairy Fulmars from HMS *Illustrious* and another Hurricane on 2 March. Three days later, I./JG 27 was escorting a Stuka attack on Hal Far airfield in the south-east of the island and, while *en route* to Libya, shot down a Hurricane. Two *Ketten* from 7./JG 26 shot down a Hurricane and a Maryland on 7 March, later strafing St. Paul's Bay and damaging a Sunderland flying boat. On the 10th, most other *Luftwaffe* units were transferred to North Africa, leaving 7./JG 26 as the largest in Sicily. An attack by the *Staffel* on Wellingtons five days later led to the destruction of one by Müncheberg and the temporary withdrawal of this type, and the Sunderlands, to North Africa. On 18 March, six of an eventual force of 12 Hurricanes arrived in Malta from North Africa, but seven of the type were claimed destroyed by 7./JG 26

BELOW: Although reluctant to become directly involved in the Middle East, in December 1940 Hitler ordered the transfer of the X. Fliegerkorps under Generalleutnant Hans Geisler to Sicily where, by 10 January, it had become operational. Here, Geisler awards the EK II to some of the men under his command.

four days later. On the 28th Müncheberg flew his 200th combat sortie, during which he claimed his 33rd victory, another Hurricane.



ABOVE: Hurricanes at readiness on a Maltese aerodrome.

A temporary respite was given to the hard-pressed people of Malta by the arrival, on 3 April, of 12 of the new Hurricane IIAs which were some 20 mph (32 km/h) faster than the old Mk. Is. These had been flown off the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*. Then, two days later, 7./JG 26 transferred to Taranto in Italy to support the forthcoming German invasion of Yugoslavia. It returned to Gela on the 8th, flying sorties against Malta in company with III./ZG 26 and a Stuka *Gruppe*. On 27 April, Malta received another 23 Hurricanes which flew off from HMS *Ark Royal*. 7./JG 26 shot up and destroyed a Sunderland which had landed after escorting the first flight of seven Hurricanes.

On 5 May, 7./JG 26 was temporarily joined at Gela by III./JG 27 under *Hptm.* Max Dobislav, and the next day the two units flew as escort for a He 111 attack on Malta. During this, *Oblt. Graf* Erbo von Kageneck, *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 27, shot down a Hurricane, with two more falling to the guns of *Oblt.* Müncheberg. Müncheberg's success brought his total number of victories to 40 for which he was awarded the *Eichenlaub* to the *Ritterkreuz* on 7 May.

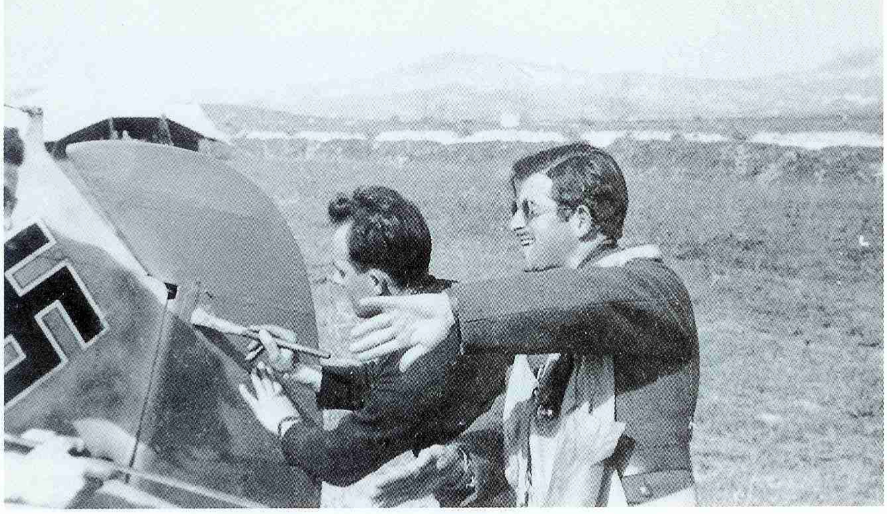
Four days later the forces of X. *Fliegerkorps* returned to Sicily in preparation for a full-scale attack on Malta and Allied shipping. At this time the *Luftwaffe* possessed a total of 60 operational Bf 109s from 7./JG 26 and III./JG 27. Next day, in an attempt to counter this threat, the one RAF fighter unit in Malta, 261 Sqn., equipped with Hurricanes, was divided into two, one half, equipped with Hurricane IIs, becoming 185 Sqn. On 13 May, von Kageneck shot down a Hurricane of 261 Sqn. followed by another aircraft from 185 Sqn. on each of the next two days. He shot down another Hurricane on 20 May to register his fourth victory over Malta but, on that day, the unit returned to Germany. At the same time, X. *Fliegerkorps* returned to southern Greece to spearhead the invasion of Crete. This again left 7./JG 26 as the only *Luftwaffe* unit based in Sicily.

On 21 May, 249 Sqn. was added to Malta's defence when it flew its Hurricanes to the island from the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal.* It had originally been intended that these aircraft would fly on to North Africa, but the new air commander on Malta managed to persuade the RAF they would be of more use there. At the same time 261 Sqn. was disbanded. Four days later, Bf 109s from 7./JG 26 shot up four Hurricanes from 249 Sqn. at Ta'Qali airfield, but following this the *Staffel* transferred to Molaoi in southern Greece. During its stay in Sicily, the unit claimed at least 42 victories of which 20 were credited to Müncheberg, all without a single operational loss.

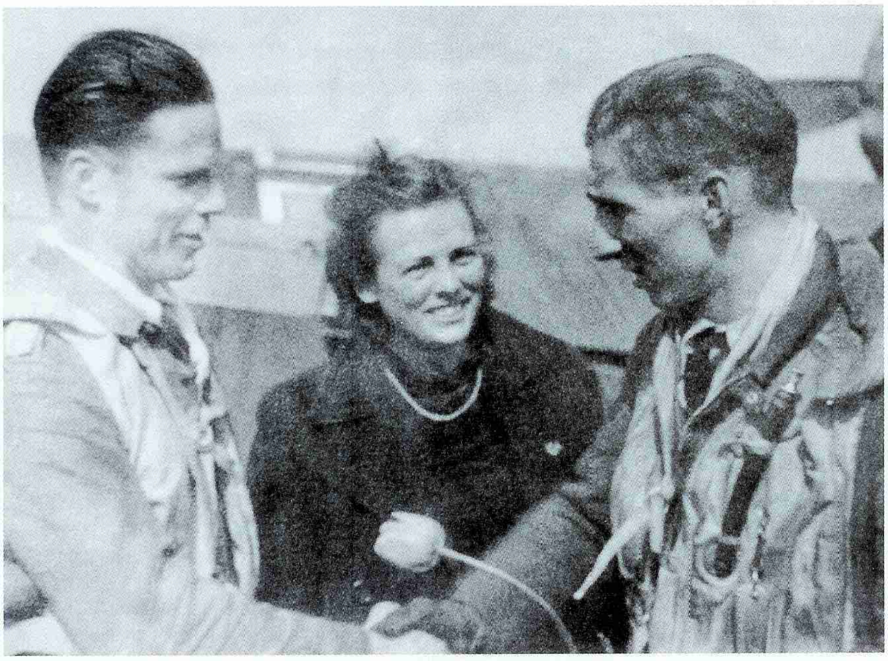
The departure of 7./JG 26 to Greece allowed the RAF to strengthen its forces on Malta with the first of a number of Blenheim and Beaufighter units. These were further reinforced on 28 June when the first Hurricane IICs, with an armament of four 20 mm cannon, arrived on the island. The offensive against Malta was now left to the *Regia Aeronautica* and this resulted in the defending Hurricanes enjoying a considerable edge over their attackers. Moreover, robbed of their previous superiority, the Axis air forces were unable to prevent the sinking of many more supply ships throughout the Summer, and in September, the RAF on Malta was even able to mount attacks on Axis airfields in Sardinia and Libya.

This situation changed with the introduction of the *Regia Aeronautica's* first Macchi C.202 fighters on 1 October 1941. With its licence-built DB 601 A-1 engine and armament of two 12.7 mm and two 7.7 mm machine-guns, the new fighter quickly established an ascendancy over the Hurricane.

RIGHT: Malta based Hurricanes taking off to intercept Italian raiders.



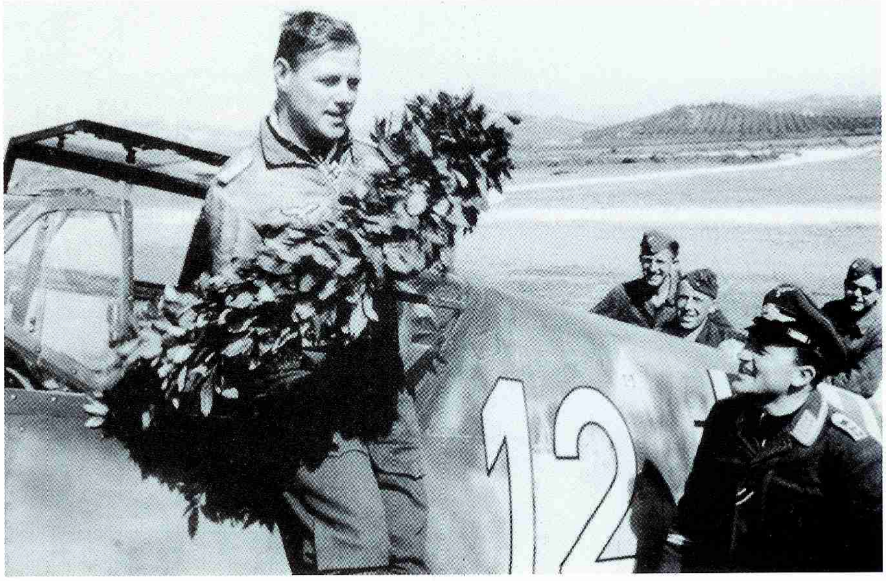
LEFT: On the afternoon of 16 February 1941, two Schwärme fron 7./JG 26 flew a sweep in support of some Ju 87s from Stukageschwader 2 which were to attack Malta's Luqa airfield. During the course of the sweep, the Bf 109s surprised a patrol of eight Hurricanes of 261 Sqn., three of which were claimed destroyed. Here, Uffz. Georg Mondry is seen describing his part in the air battle in which he badly damaged a Hurricane 10 km south of Valetta and claimed it destroyed as his first victory. During this combat, his Staffelkapitän, Oblt. Müncheberg, claimed his 25th and 26th victories.



ABOVE: Oblt. Klaus Mietusch of 7./JG 26 claimed his first victory in the Mediterranean on 26 February 1941. His victim was a Hurricane, shot down south of Malta, and brought his total claims to three.

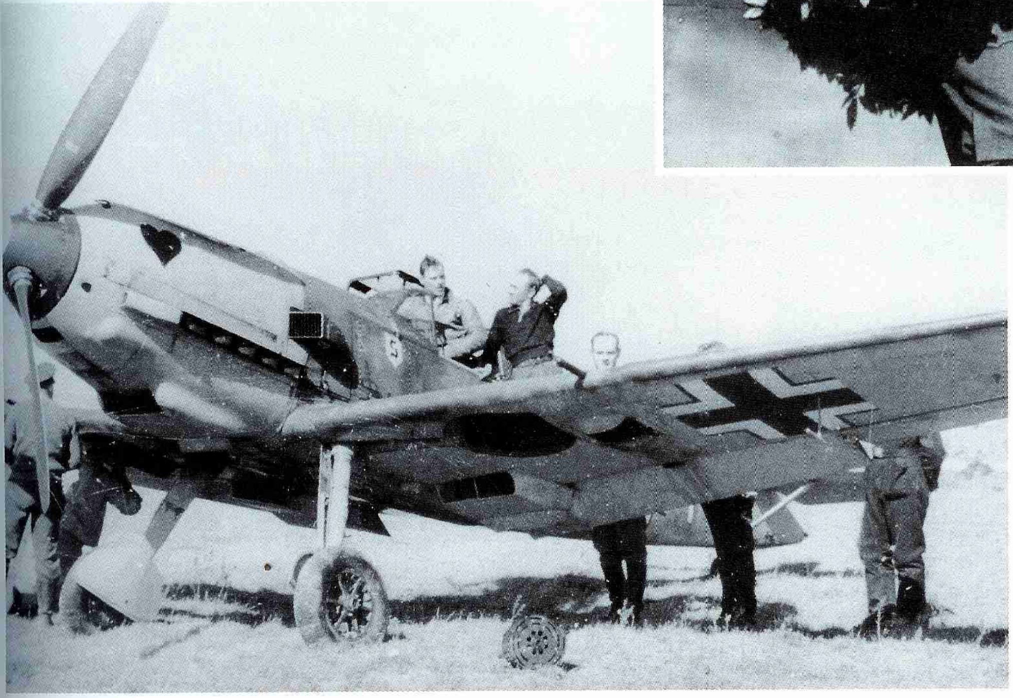
ABOVE: On 22 March 1941, ten Ju 88s attacked Malta. The German bombers were escorted by 12 Bf 109s which became involved in combat with eight Hurricanes which rose to intercept the bombers. The result was an overwhelming success for the German fighter pilots who claimed seven of the Hurricanes destroyed without having any of their own aircraft damaged. One of the successful pilots was Oblt. Klaus Mietusch who claimed his fourth and fifth victories within two minutes 40 km north of Malta. On his return, Mietusch is seen here, on the right, being congratulated by Ofw. Ernst Laube. The female onlooker seen in the centre is believed to be a member of a troupe of theatrical entertainers then touring the area.

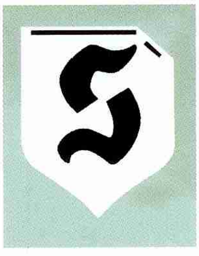
RIGHT: Oblt. Klaus Mietusch of 7./JG 26 returns to Gela after another victory. As Mietusch's aircraft carries seven Abschussbalken, it is presumed that the pilot is being congratulated on his eighth victory, a Hurricane claimed north-east of Kalafrana on Malta on 13 April 1941. Like Oblt. Müncheberg, Mietusch is believed to have had two Bf 109s at his disposal while flying operations from Sicily, 'White 2' and 'White 13'.



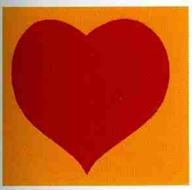
ABOVE: Oblt. Joachim Müncheberg, the Staffelkapitän of 7./JG 26 on his return to Gela after completing his 200th war flight on 28 March 1941. On this occasion he claimed a Hurricane destroyed south of the island of Gozo, off Malta, bringing his personal victory tally to 33.

BELOW: This deceptively tranquil scene shows Oblt. Joachim Müncheberg in the cockpit of his 'White 1', but note the open bay on the underside of the wing and the magazine for the MG FF cannon lying on the grass. This photograph is believed to have been taken on or shortly after 16 February 1941 when 7./JG 2 escorted Ju 87s of Stukageschwader 2 to Malta and Müncheberg shot down a Hurricane, the pilot of which was seriously wounded.





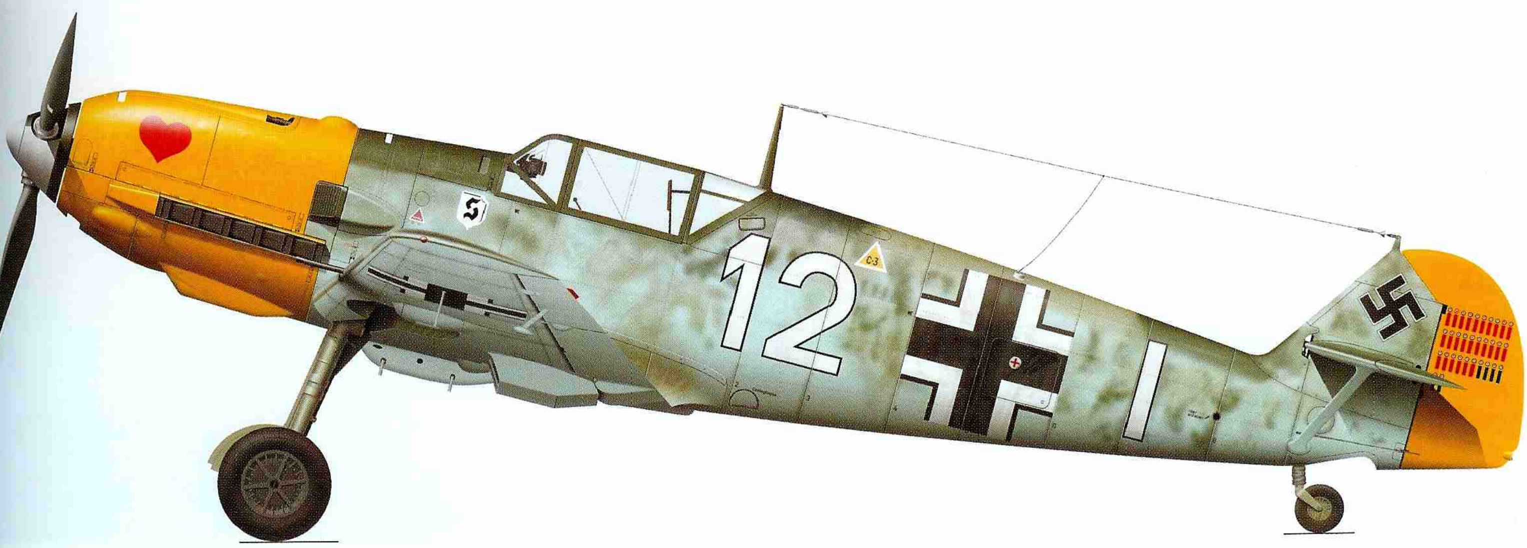
JG 26 'Schlageter' badge



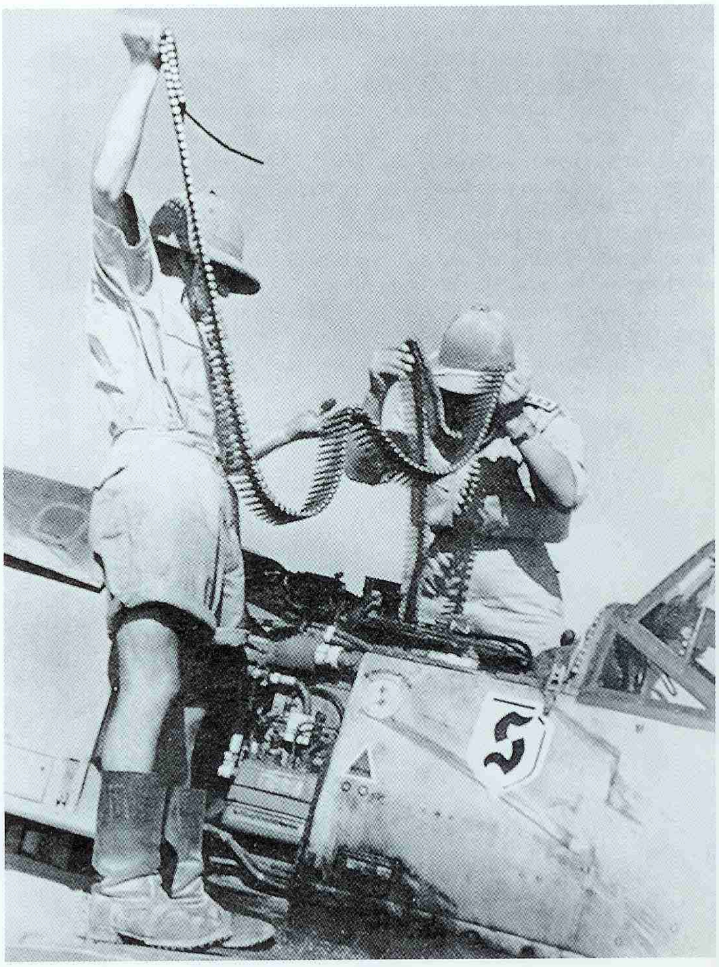
7./JG 26 badge

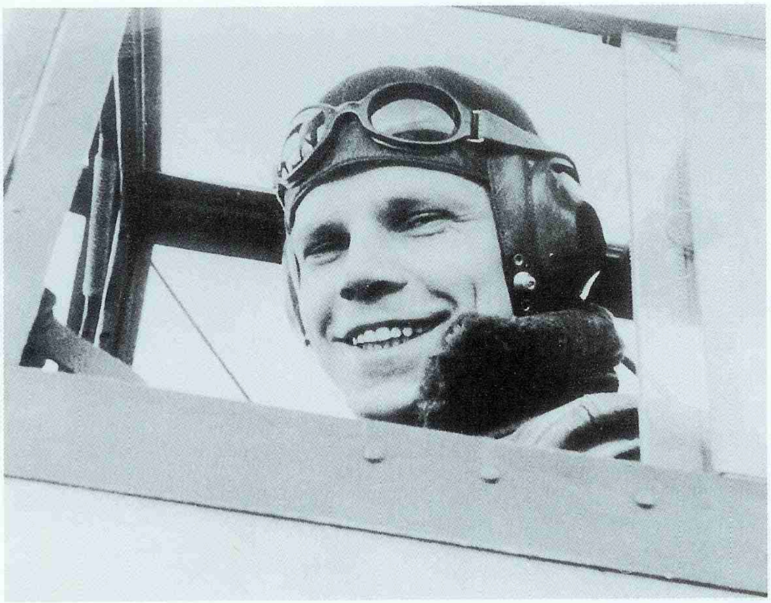
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7/N 'White 12' flown by Oblt. Joachim Müncheberg, Staffelkapitän of 7./JG 26, Sicily, March 1941

Oblt. Müncheberg flew two aircraft while operating from Sicily, 'White 1' and this 'White 12', both of which were finished in similar 02/71 European-style camouflage schemes. Both aircraft were also marked with a record of Müncheberg's Abschuss tally, roundels above the bars denoting the nationality of his claims which were all British aircraft except his second, which was French. 'White 12' is shown here after the rudder had been marked with Müncheberg's 32nd victory, a Wellington shot down off Gozo. Note, however, that these bars are not exactly parallel with the rudder hinge line.

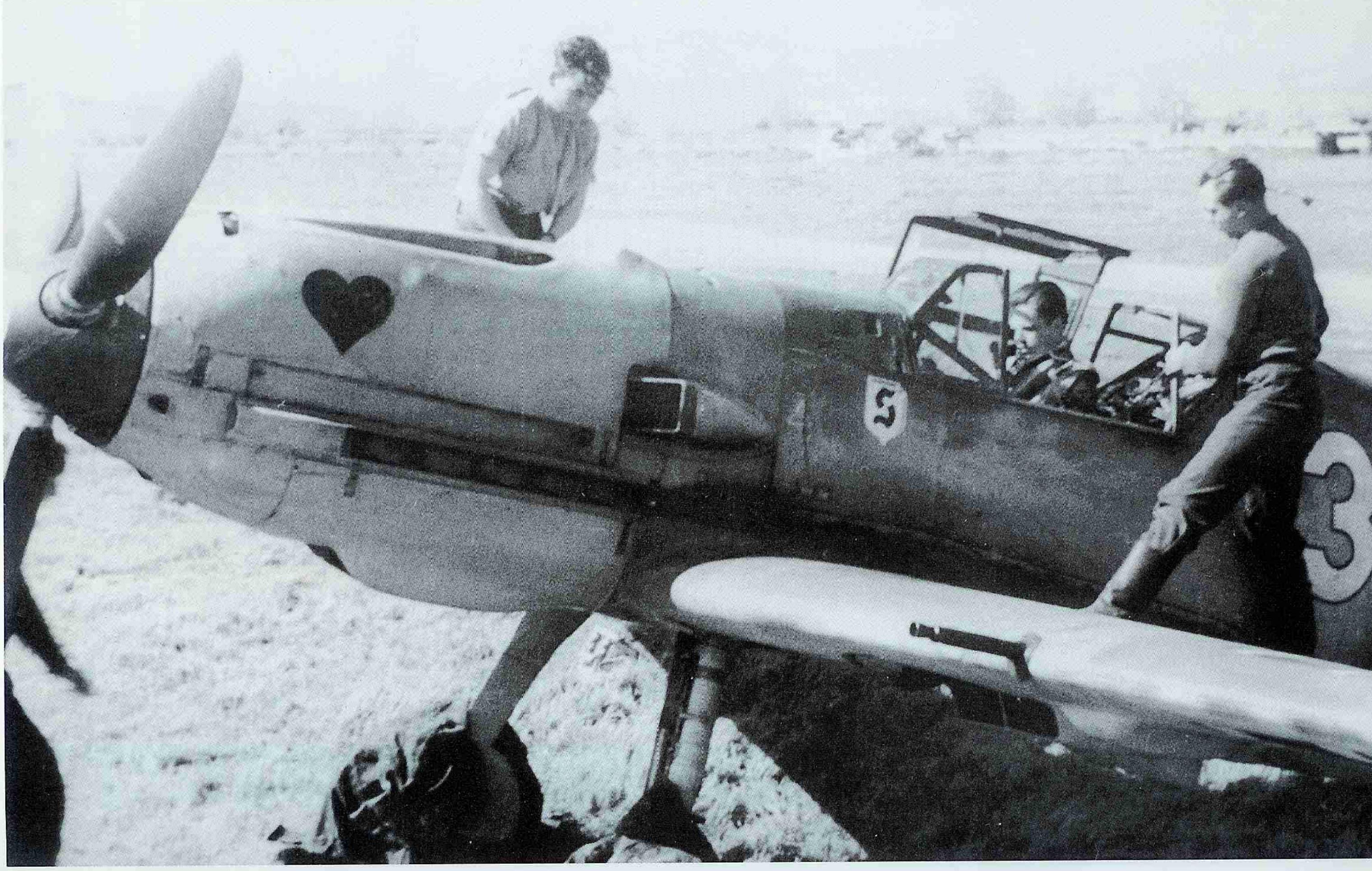


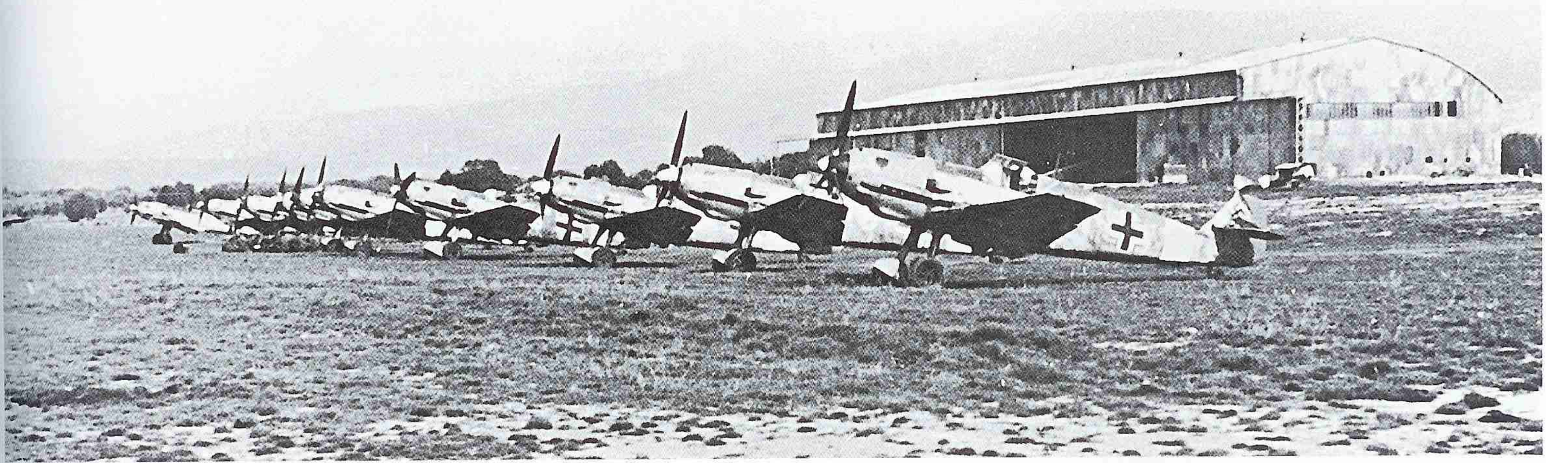
RIGHT: Reloading the fuselage-mounted MG 17 guns of a Bf 109 E belonging to 7./JG 26.





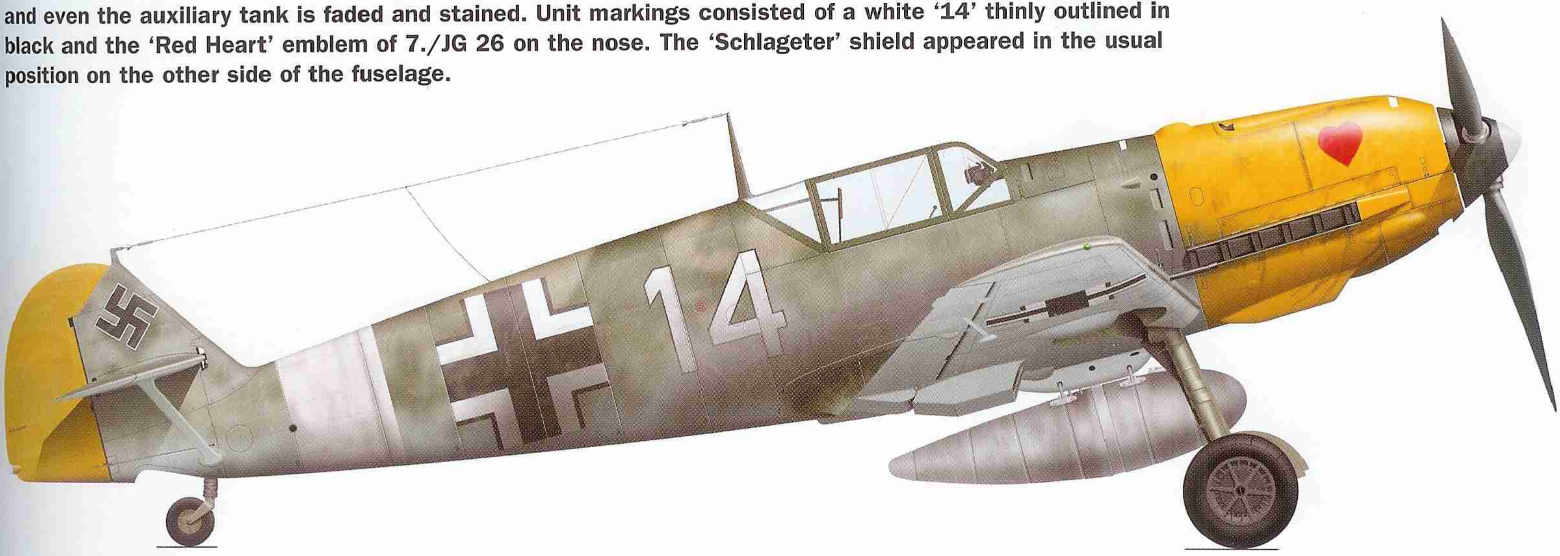
ABOVE: Ofw. Ernst Laube of 7./JG 26 claimed his first victory, a Hurricane, off Malta on 1 May 1941, although it is not known whether this was confirmed. Laube normally flew 'White 3' and is seen (*BELOW*) seated in this aircraft at Gela in Sicily.



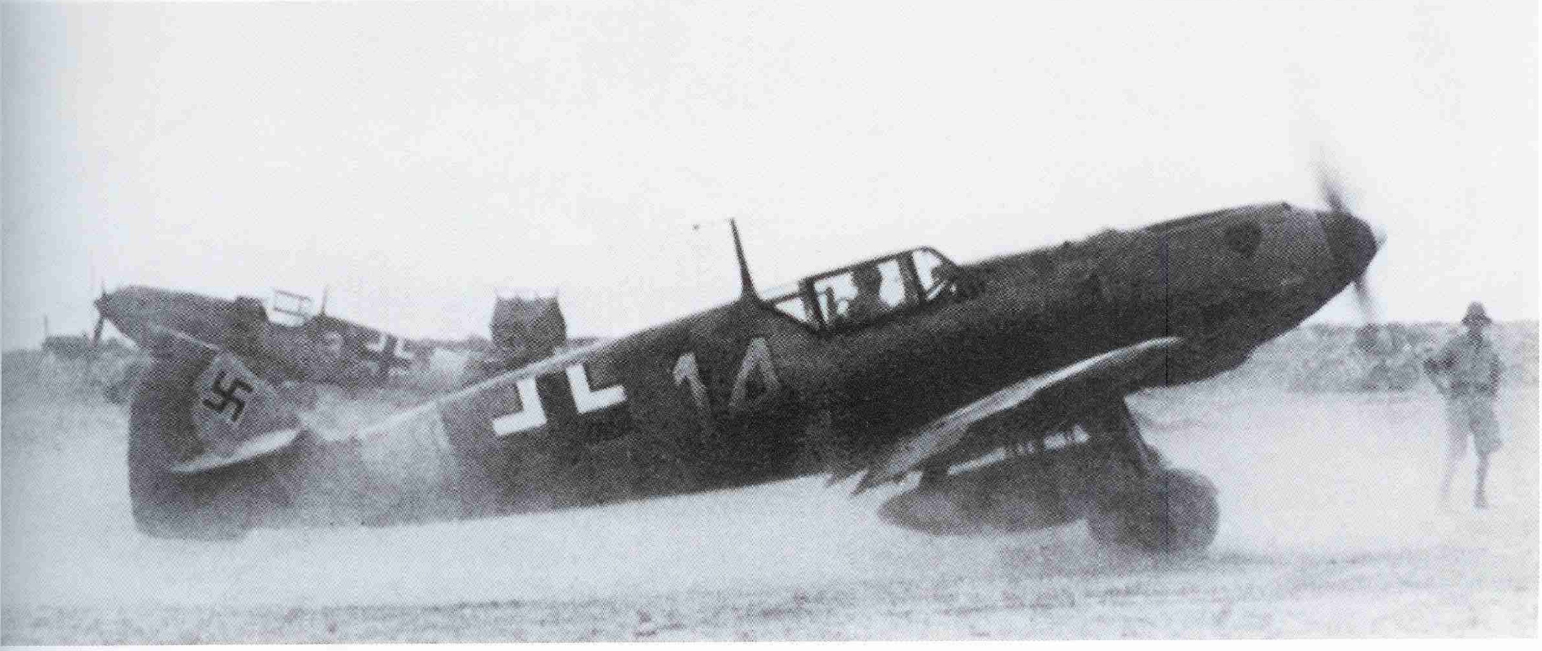


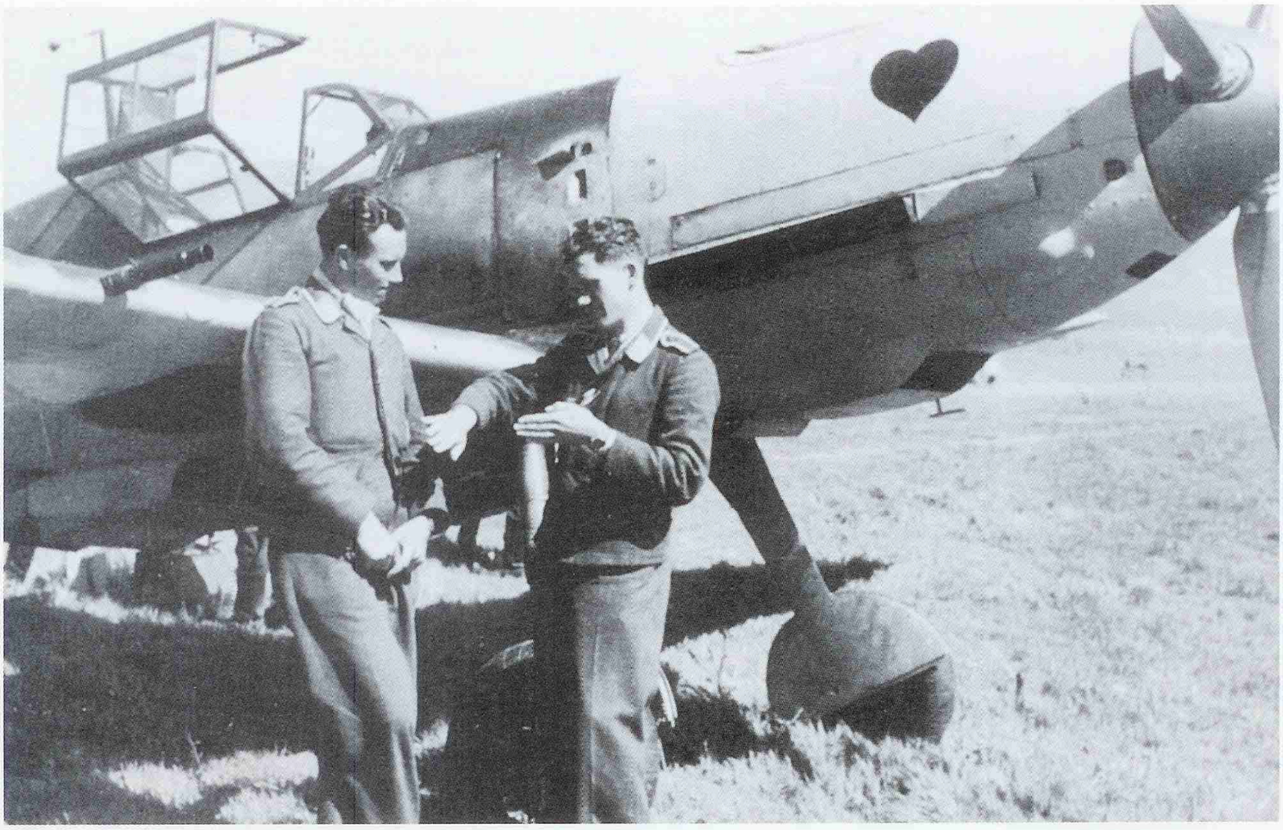
ABOVE: Line up of Bf 109 E-7s of 7./JG 26 on Sicily.

Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop 'White 14' of 7./JG 26, Sicily, early 1941
The general appearance of this aircraft suggests it has seen some hard use. The 02/71 finish, applied in a splinter pattern on the wing uppersurfaces and fuselage top decking with mottled fuselage sides, is weathered and even the auxiliary tank is faded and stained. Unit markings consisted of a white '14' thinly outlined in black and the 'Red Heart' emblem of 7./JG 26 on the nose. The 'Schlageter' shield appeared in the usual position on the other side of the fuselage.

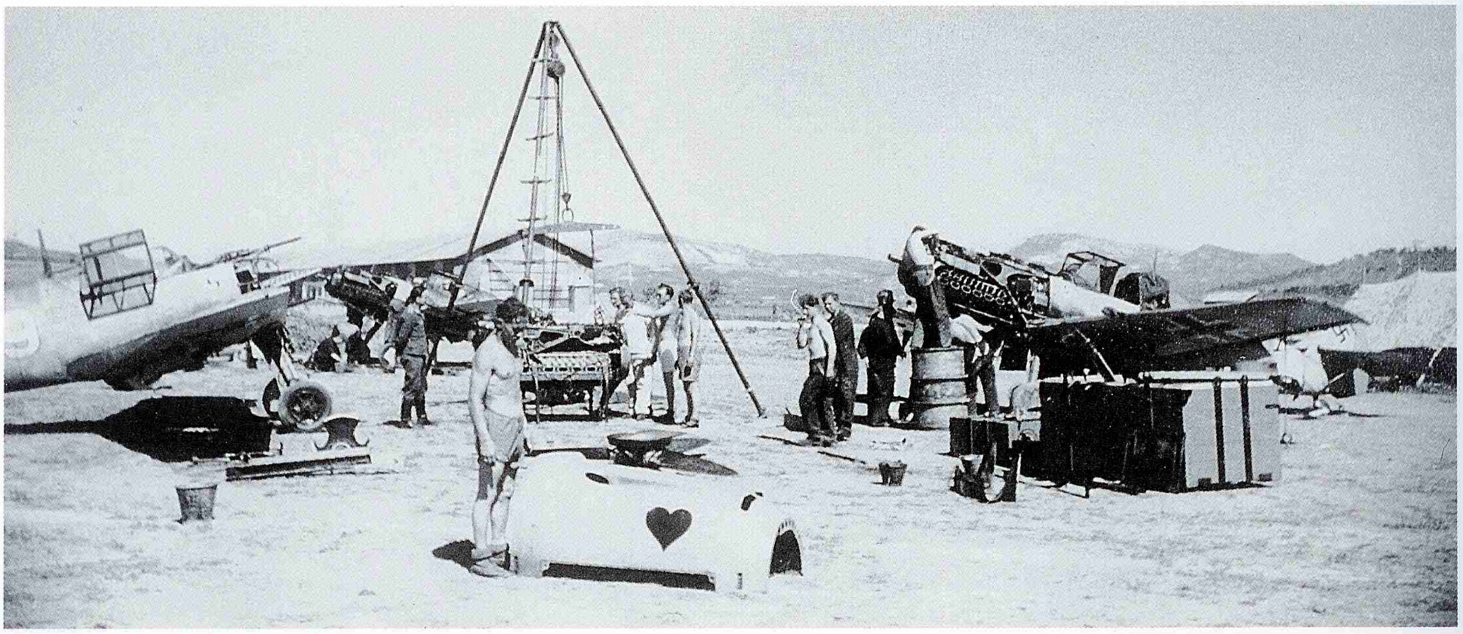


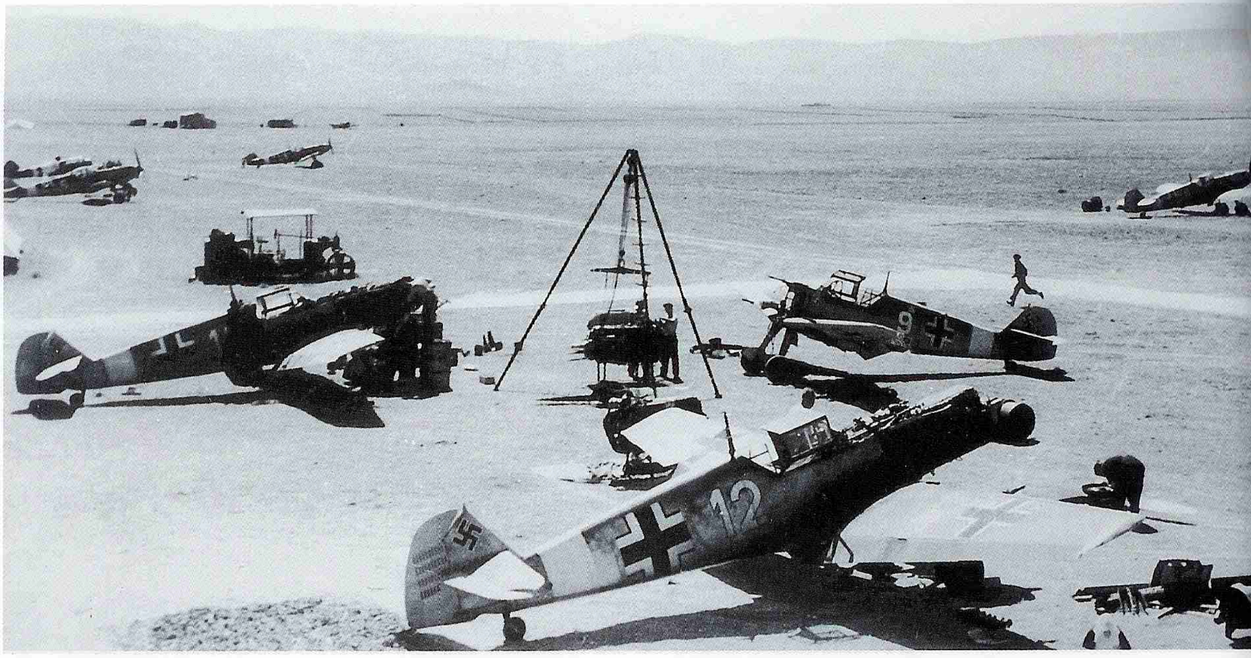
BELOW: This Bf 109 E-7 coded 'White 14' is believed to have been flown in Sicily by Lt. Hans Johannsen of 7./JG 26. Before arriving in Sicily, Johannsen had no kills but by the time the Staffel returned to France he had been awarded seven confirmed aerial victories and had destroyed a number of aircraft on the ground.





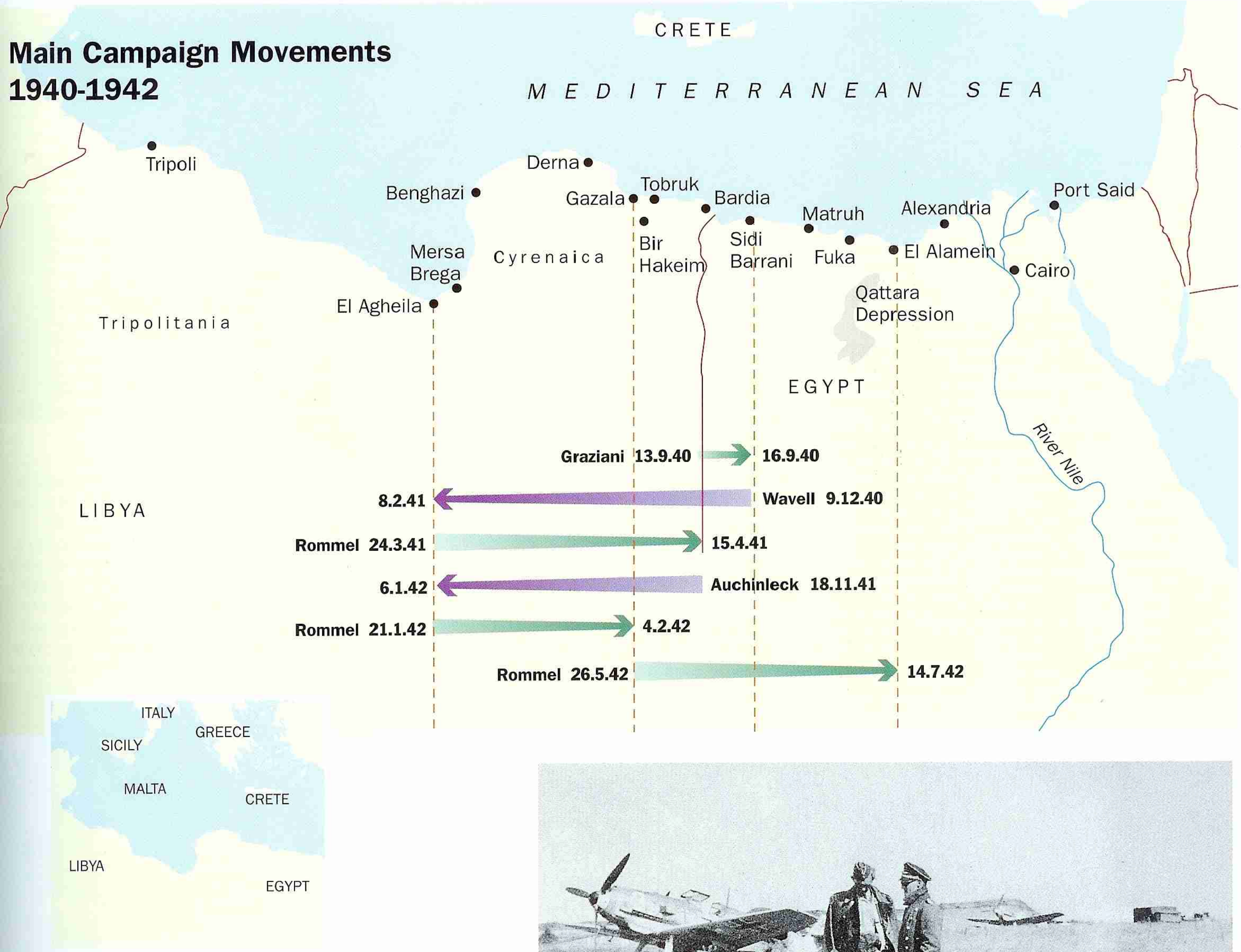
THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: Various scenes featuring aircraft, pilots and ground personnel of 7./JG 26 while operating against Malta from Sicily. All these aircraft carry the red heart badge of the Staffel on their cowlings. This badge was later adopted by Jagdgeschwader 77 'Herzas' which Müncheberg commanded between 1 October 1942 and 23 March 1943.





TOP AND ABOVE: General airfield scenes at Gela on Sicily showing various aircraft of 7./JG 26 in the maintenance area. Closest to the camera (*ABOVE*) is Oblt. Müncheberg's 'White 12' with the rudder now apparently marked with his 35th and 36th victories which were claimed on 11 April 1941.

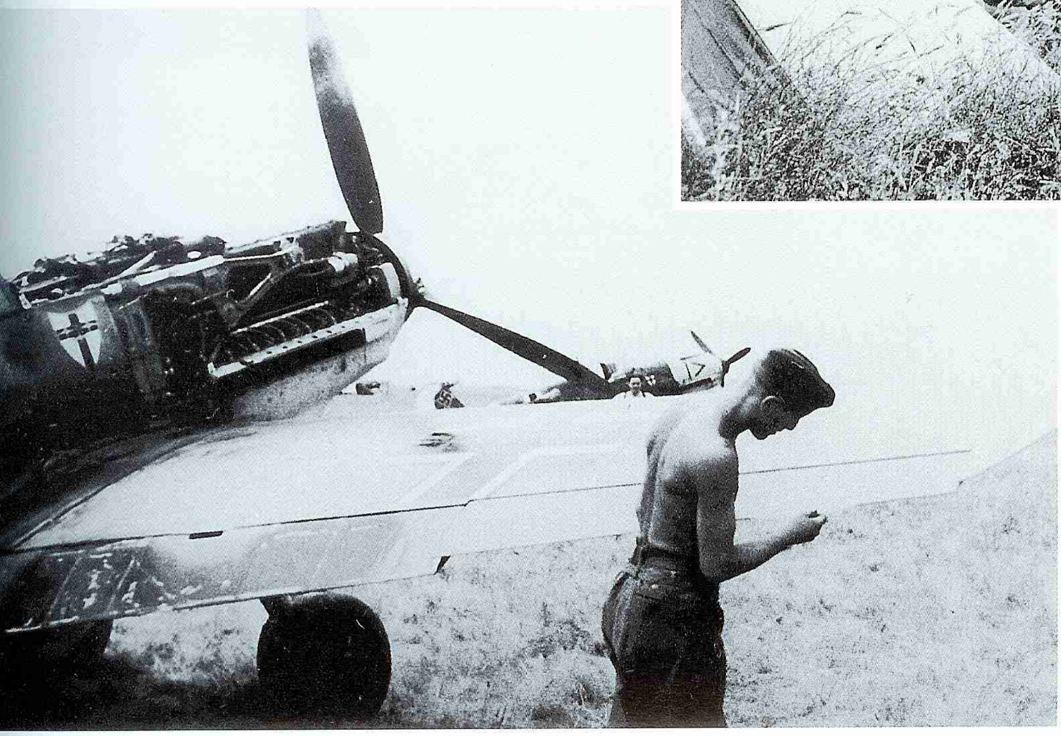
LEFT: By the time 7./JG 26 returned to France in September 1941, Müncheberg's claims had reached 48, of which 25 were claimed destroyed while he was operating in the Mediterranean theatre. Thus Müncheberg claimed almost half the total of at least 52 enemy aircraft that the Staffel destroyed in the Mediterranean theatre, a record made all the more remarkable by the fact that it sustained no losses during this period.



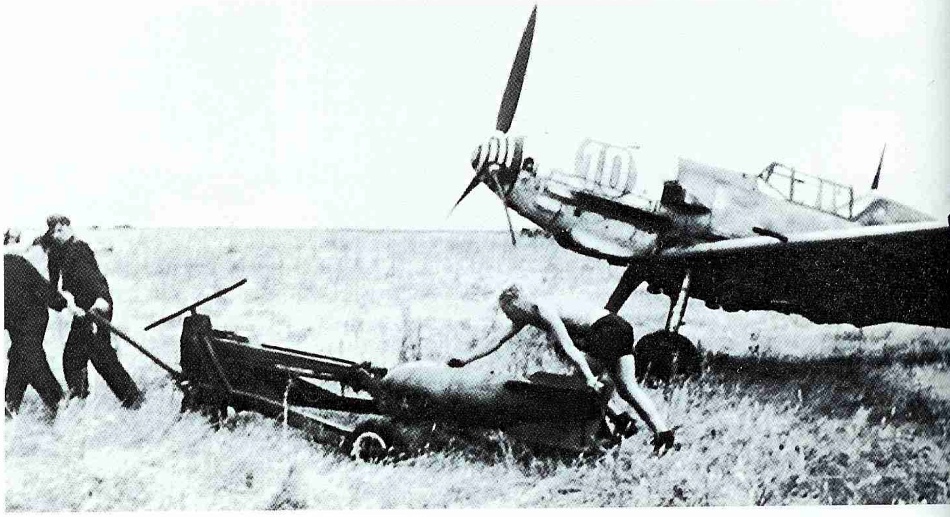
Main Campaign Movements 1940-1942

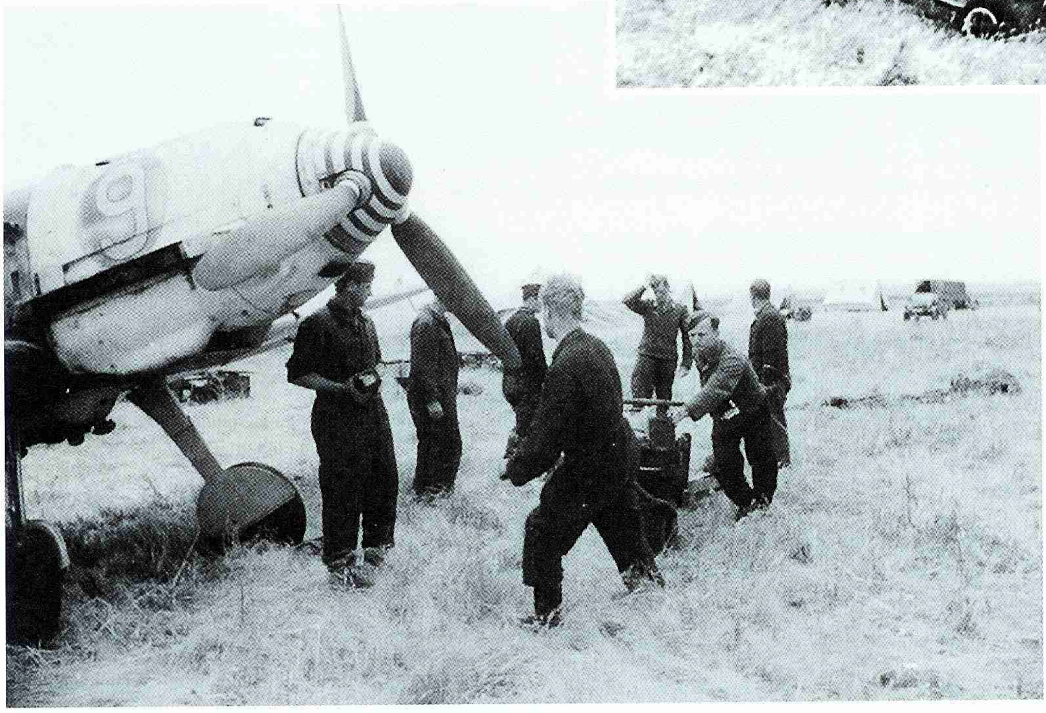
CRETE
MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Tripoli
Derna
Benghazi
Gazala
Tobruk
Bardia
Matruh
Alexandria
Port Said
Bir Hakeim
Sidi Barrani
Fuka
El Alamein
Cairo
Mersa Brega
Cyrenaica
El Agheila
Tripolitania
Qattara Depression
EGYPT
River Nile
LIBYA
Graziani 13.9.40
16.9.40
8.2.41
Wavell 9.12.40
Rommel 24.3.41
15.4.41
6.1.42
Auchinleck 18.11.41
Rommel 21.1.42
4.2.42
Rommel 26.5.42
14.7.42
ITALY
GREECE
SICILY
MALTA
CRETE
LIBYA
EGYPT

ABOVE: The aircraft in the left middle distance is 'White 2' of 7./ JG 27. This Staffel was commanded by Oblt. Erhard Braune, seen here standing on the far right at Gela, with other officers of III./JG 27.

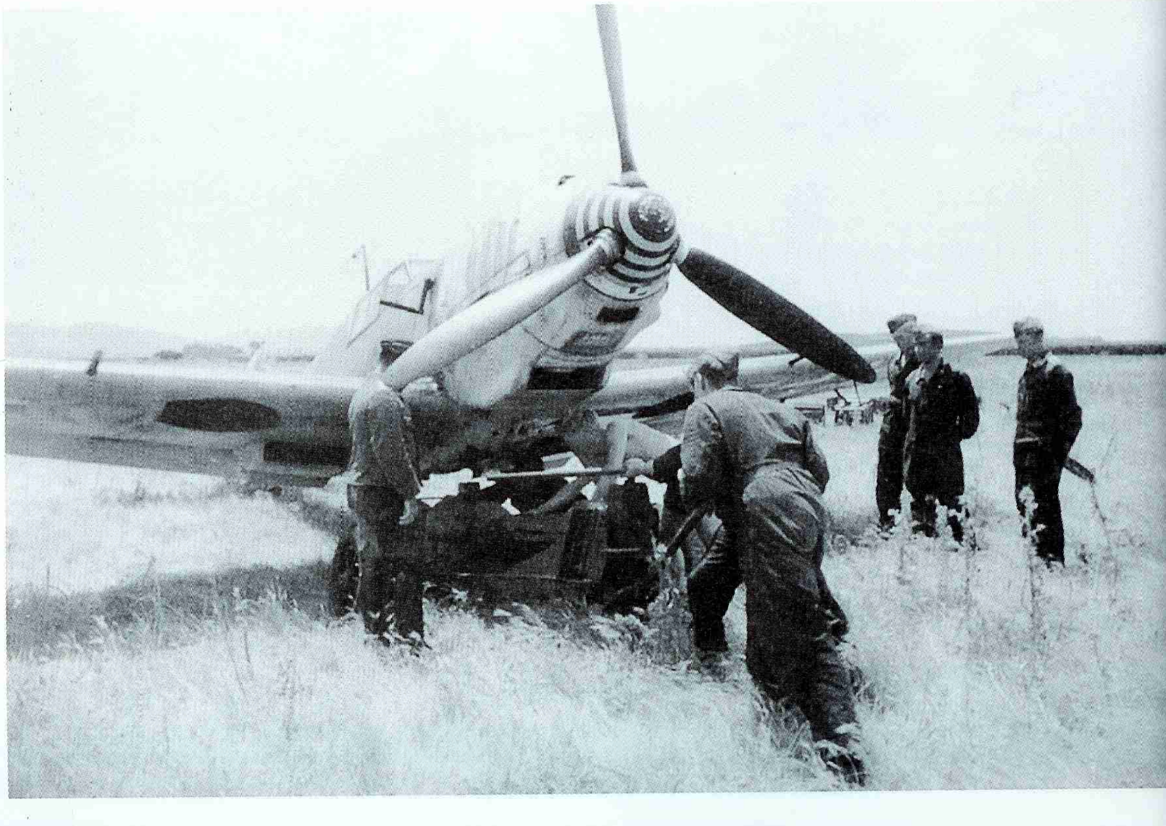


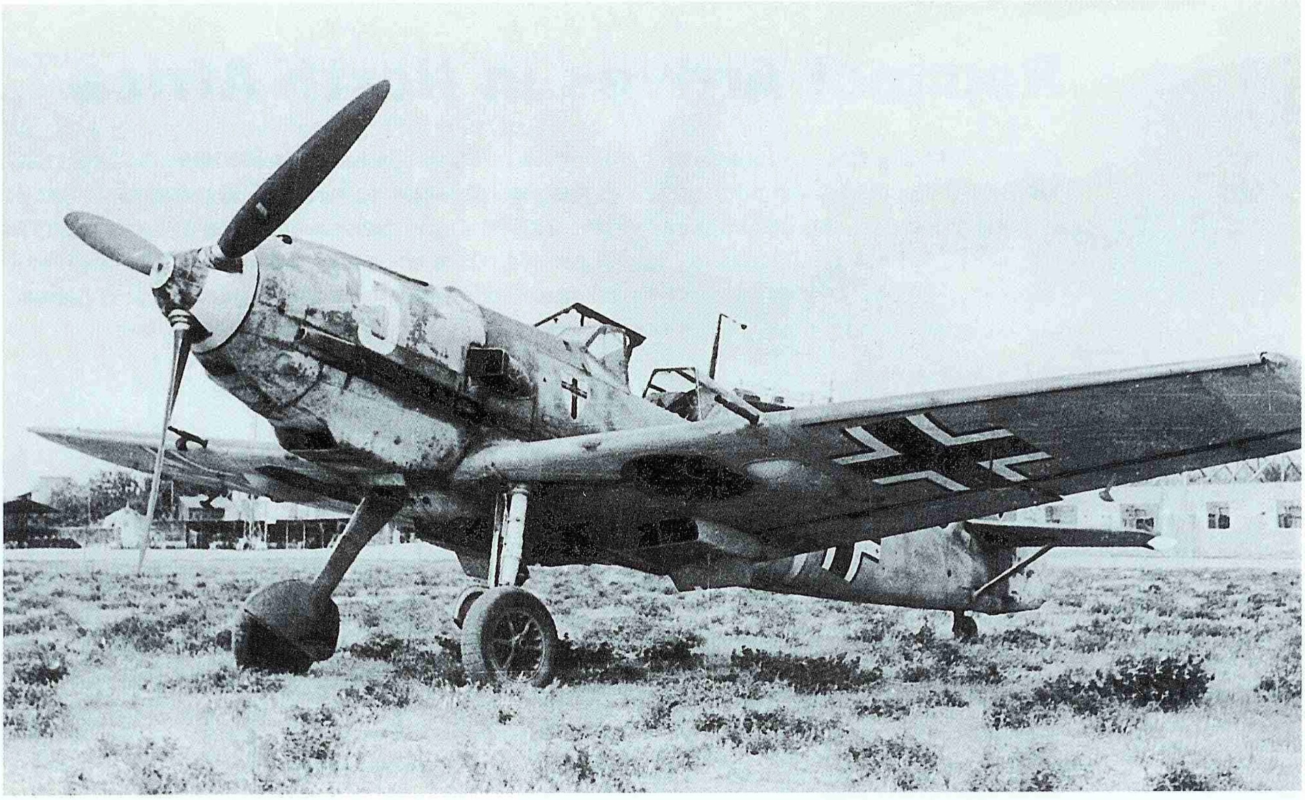
LEFT: Bf 109 Es of III./JG 27 at Gela in May 1941. In the background, marked with a chevron and bar, is an aircraft of the Gruppenstab, W.Nr. 785.



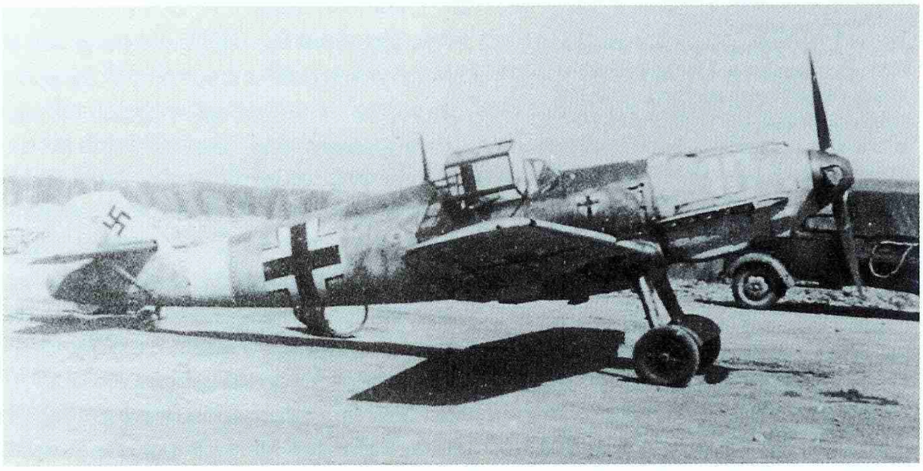


THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Between 3 and 24 May 1941, III./JG 27 was based at Gela in Sicily for operations against Malta. These photographs show 'Brown 7', '9' and '10', all of 9./JG 27, being loaded with 250 kg bombs prior to a Jabo operation against Malta. Both aircraft have the characteristic ringed spinner of 9. Staffel. Note that the individual aircraft numbers were painted on the original camouflage prior to the yellow paint being applied to the nose leaving a circle of the original finish.





RIGHT: Also photographed on Sicily was this well-weathered aircraft, 'White 5', of 9./JG 27. Note how badly the temporary yellow paint has weathered compared with the permanent camouflage colours.



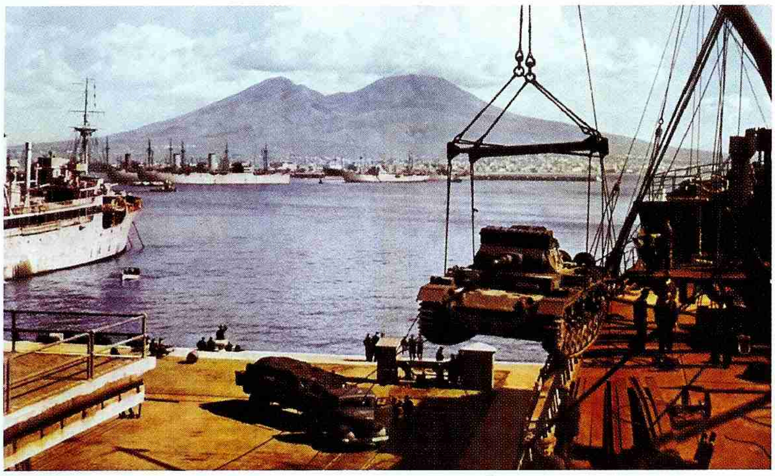
ABOVE LEFT: Onlookers anxiously greet an apparently exhausted Hptm. Max Dobislav, the Kommandeur of III./JG 27, on his return to Gela after shooting down his 9th Abschuss, a Hurricane, during a mission to Malta on 15 May 1941. Note the Kommandeur's pennant fixed to the radio mast.

ABOVE: 'White 10', also of 9./JG 27 at Gela, in Sicily.

Rommel Arrives in North Africa

On 6 February 1941, a fierce tank battle developed between Italian forces defending Benghazi and British Commonwealth troops. The 6th Australian Division pushed around the Italians, and by the morning of the next day, had entered the city. 20,000 Italian troops were killed or taken prisoner and 120 tanks and 190 guns captured. In just two months a brilliantly led army had, with high mobility, defeated a force four times its size and was now encamped in front of El Agheila, almost halfway into Libya. But now relief for the Italians was at hand.

BELOW: Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel, left foreground, inspecting troops of the 5. Light Division in Tripoli on 27 February 1941.



ABOVE: German armour and soft-skin vehicles being loaded for shipment to North Africa. Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel arrived in Tripoli on 12 February 1941, followed two days later by the first German troops of the 5. Light Division which began disembarking at Tripoli. The 5. Light Division, which was not up to full strength until mid-April, became the 21. Panzer Division in October. It was joined in May 1941 by the 15. Panzer Division and together these two divisions formed the Deutsches Afrika Korps, or DAK. In August 1941, a number of independent motorised infantry units were amalgamated as the Afrika Division, later renamed 90. Light Division on 27 November. From 15 August 1941, these formations were known together as Panzergruppe Afrika and from 22 January 1942 as Panzerarmee Afrika.

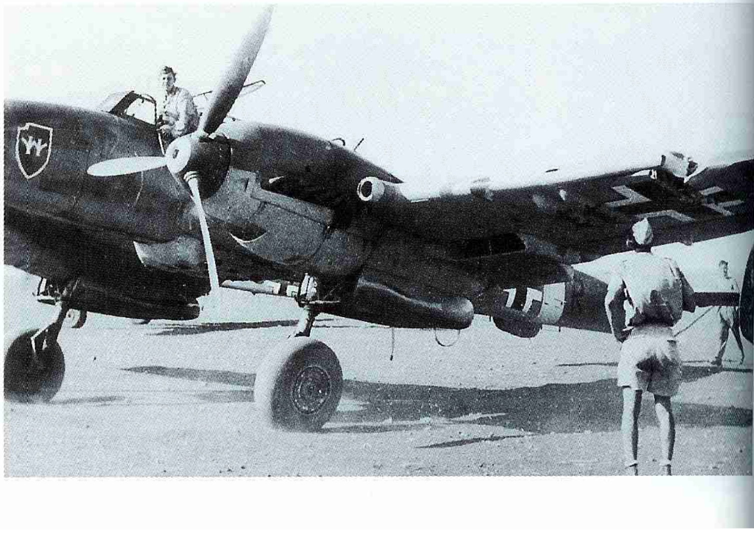
Five days after the capture of Benghazi, *Generalleutnant* Erwin Rommel arrived in North Africa to take command of German ground forces and, on the 14th, the first armoured units arrived in Tripoli harbour. Previously, on 31 January, the first *Luftwaffe* unit had flown to North Africa, III./ZG 26 under *Major* Karl Kaschka transferring to Castel Benito, Sirte and Arco Philaenorum. It was a Bf 110 from this *Gruppe* which became the first German aircraft to be lost in North Africa when it forced-landed behind British lines on 14 February. Next day, Hurricanes of 3 Sqn. RAAF shot down a Ju 88 A-4 from II./LG 1, but the first major air battle between British and German forces in North Africa took place on the 17th when Hurricanes clashed with 12 Ju 87s from I./St.G 1 and claimed eight destroyed.

The first clash on the ground between British and German troops took place on 20 February when armoured cars from the 2nd Armoured Division met German troops between Marsa Braga and El Agheila. The appearance of the Germans did not, however, prevent Allied forces being diverted from North Africa to support operations in Greece from 5 March. This left Rommel facing much depleted opposition, British forces being further weakened by the withdrawal of the 7th Armoured Division for refitting.

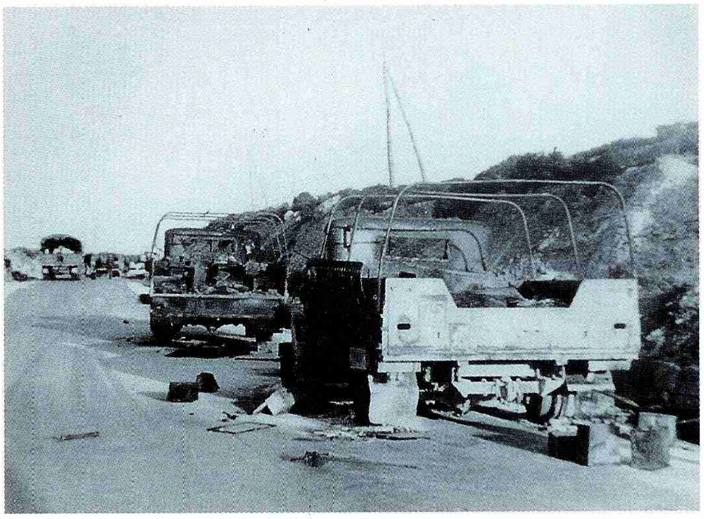
BELOW: One of the first Luftwaffe units to arrive in North Africa was Major Karl Kaschka's III./ZG 26 equipped with Bf 110 heavy fighters. Although this Gruppe flew escort sorties, its aircraft could be fitted with bomb racks for operations in the fighter-bomber role. This aircraft has evidently received some combat damage to its wing.

Order of Battle 22 February 1941 for X. Fliegerkorps

			A/C on Strength	A/C Servicable
1.(*F*)/121	Ju 88	Catania	17	(7)
7./JG 26	Bf 109 E	Gela	14	(12)
I./NJG 3	Bf 110	Gela	7	(4)
III./ZG 26	Bf 110	Palermo	40	(31)
Stab/LG 1	Ju 88	Catania	-	(-)
II./LG 1	Ju 88	Catania	24	(13)
III./LG 1	Ju 88	Catania	17	(7)
4./KG 4	He 111	Comiso	9	(7)
II./KG 26	He 111	Comiso	30	(9)
Stab/St.G 3	Ju 87	Trapani	5	(2)
I./St.G 1	Ju 87	Trapani	30	(22)
II./St.G 2	Ju 87	Trapani	38	(31)



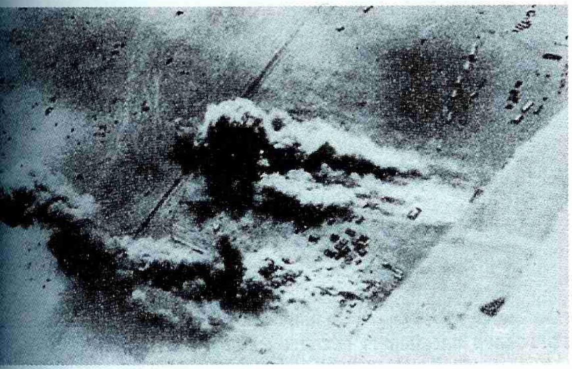
Rommel's first attack began at dawn on 24 March 1941, when reconnaissance formations attacked El Agheila and drove the defending British units out without a fight. A week later a heavier attack saw British forces crumble and, by 2 April, German and Italian forces had taken the Agedabia region, two months ahead of their original schedule. Benghazi fell two days later and, on 8 April, most of the remaining British armour was destroyed at Derna and Mechili. On the 10th, Axis columns reached the perimeter of the strategically important port of Tobruk. Wavell had decided to hold the city at any cost and 36,000 troops had already been assembled to defend the port. Here German forces were at last repulsed by heavy gunfire.



ABOVE: British motor transport belonging to a unit of the 2nd Armoured Division, possibly a troop carrying company of the RASC, abandoned during Rommel's first desert offensive which opened on 24 March 1941. After fierce fighting, when the 2nd Armoured Division halted the German 5. Light Division, the British failed to counter-attack as no reinforcements were available and were forced to pull back. Benghazi was captured on 4 April and 2nd Armoured Division, already suffering from communication difficulties, soon became fragmented and was overwhelmed on 6 April, never to reform.

Now the *Luftwaffe* came into its own, the dive bombers of I./St.G 1 and II./St.G 2 escorted by the Bf 110s of III./ZG 26 flying regular sorties against the garrison. Only one depleted Hurricane squadron remained in the area to provide a modicum of protection, but this did succeed in shooting down some of the attackers. On 14 April the first German single-engined fighter unit arrived in North Africa when a *Staffel* of I./JG 27 flew into El Gazala airfield to the west of Tobruk. As will be remembered, the unit had previously operated for a short time against Malta in March and then in the Balkans early in April. By the 18th of the month, the *Gruppe* had been brought up to full strength of three *Staffeln,* each of which used Gambut airfield at various times. The unit's *Kommandeur, Hptm.* Eduard 'Edu' Neumann, brought with him a circus caravan which had been captured in France and which he now used as his headquarters. This became a familiar sight on North African airfields and soon became known as Neumann's *'Bunte Bühne'* (Chequered Stage). The *Staffelkapitäne* of I./JG 27 were *Oblt.* Karl-Heinz Redlich (1. *Staffel*), *Hptm.* Erich Gerlitz (2. *Staffel*) and *Oblt.* Gerhard Homuth (3. *Staffel*), while other famous pilots included *Oblt.* Ludwig Franzisket (14 victories), *Lt.* Willi Kothmann (7), *Ofhr.* Hans-Joachim Marseille (7) and *Ofw.* Hermann Förster (6).

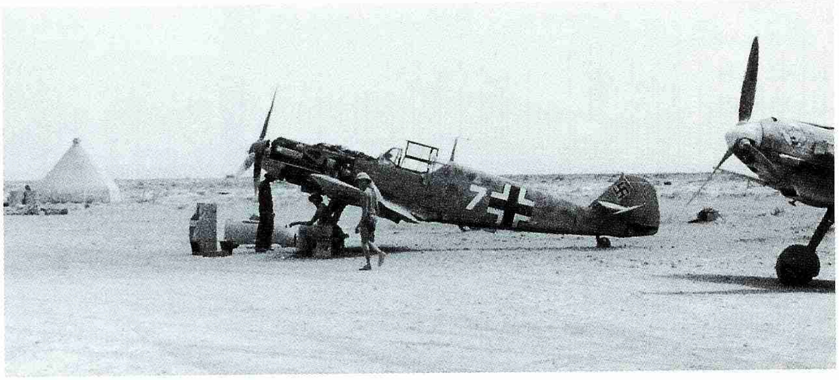
I./JG 27 flew its first operational sortie in North Africa on the morning of 19 April 1941 when it clashed with Hurricanes and claimed to have shot down four, two by *Oblt.* Redlich. During the afternoon, *Lt.* Werner Schroer was shot down by P/O Spence of 274 Sqn., but he crash-landed and was unhurt. Two days later, *Uffz.* Hans Sippel was killed and Schroer shot down a second time, possibly again by P/O Spence. Although he managed to crash-land once more, this time he was wounded.



BELOW: Tobruk under fire, as photographed from he cockpit of a u 87 dive-bomber shortly after the garrison was besieged by Axis forces in April 1941.

The final big air battle over Tobruk came on 23 April and resulted in severe RAF losses. Six Hurricanes and two Blenheims were claimed destroyed by the pilots of I./JG 27 with the only German pilot killed being *Fw.* Werner Lange. *Ofhr.* Marseille had a lucky escape when he was shot up and crashed behind Axis lines. RAF losses on the 23 April were such that most of its remaining Hurricanes withdrew from the fortress to Sidi Haneish two days later. On the 30th, Rommel launched another attack on Tobruk, the RAF flying many ground-strafing missions in its defence. Next day seven Hurricanes from 274 Sqn. attacked two *Schwärme* of Bf 109s from 3./JG 27 led by Marseille and Homuth. Such was the superiority of the German fighters that six Hurricanes were claimed shot down for the loss of two Bf 109s, one of them piloted by *Gefr.* Hermann Köhne who was injured.

Following this action, both sides began to regroup, British forces launching their first offensive against the *Afrika Korps* on 15 May. During the day British armour reached a point 20 miles south-west of Bardia, but a counter attack by the 5. Light and 15. *Panzer* divisions quickly regained all ground lost by the Germans with the exception of the Halfaya Pass. Sporadic air operations continued, I./JG 27 being mainly concerned with protecting *Afrika Korps* troops from RAF ground-attack missions. For example, on 21 May, I./JG 27 intercepted Blenheims of 14 Sqn. attacking the Capuzzo-Tobruk road and shot down five of the bombers. The only German fighter pilot to be lost during this period was *Lt.* Erich Schröder of 2./JG 27 who was taken prisoner after crashing into the sea north of Bardia following an anti-shipping strike.



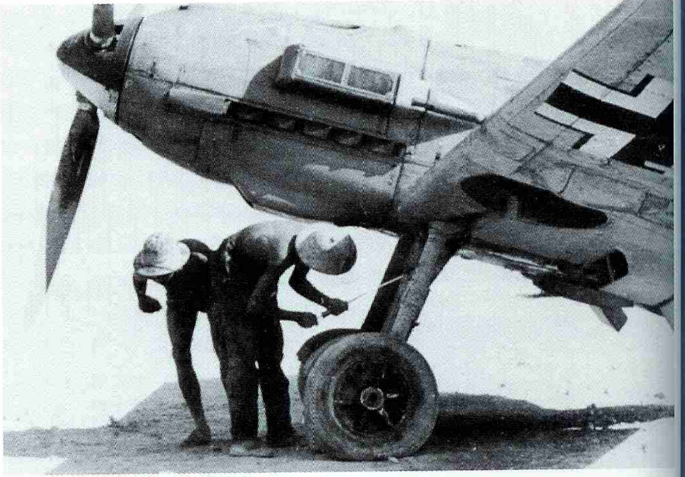
ABOVE: A pair of Bf 109 E-7 Trops of 1./JG 27 in North Africa.

On 15 June 1941 the British launched a major offensive in North Africa known as *'Battleaxe'*. The aim was to relieve Tobruk but the offensive quickly ended in failure. Of the three columns sent forward, the advance on the Halfaya Pass by Matilda tanks was beaten back by German 88 mm guns and the one on the Hafid Ridge ground to a halt because of the unreliability of the British light cruiser tanks, so that only a third attack at Capuzzo achieved some success. After *'Battleaxe'* the ground situation in the Western Desert remained quiet for five months. The investment of Tobruk continued and each side maintained a wary eye on the other and settled into a daily routine.

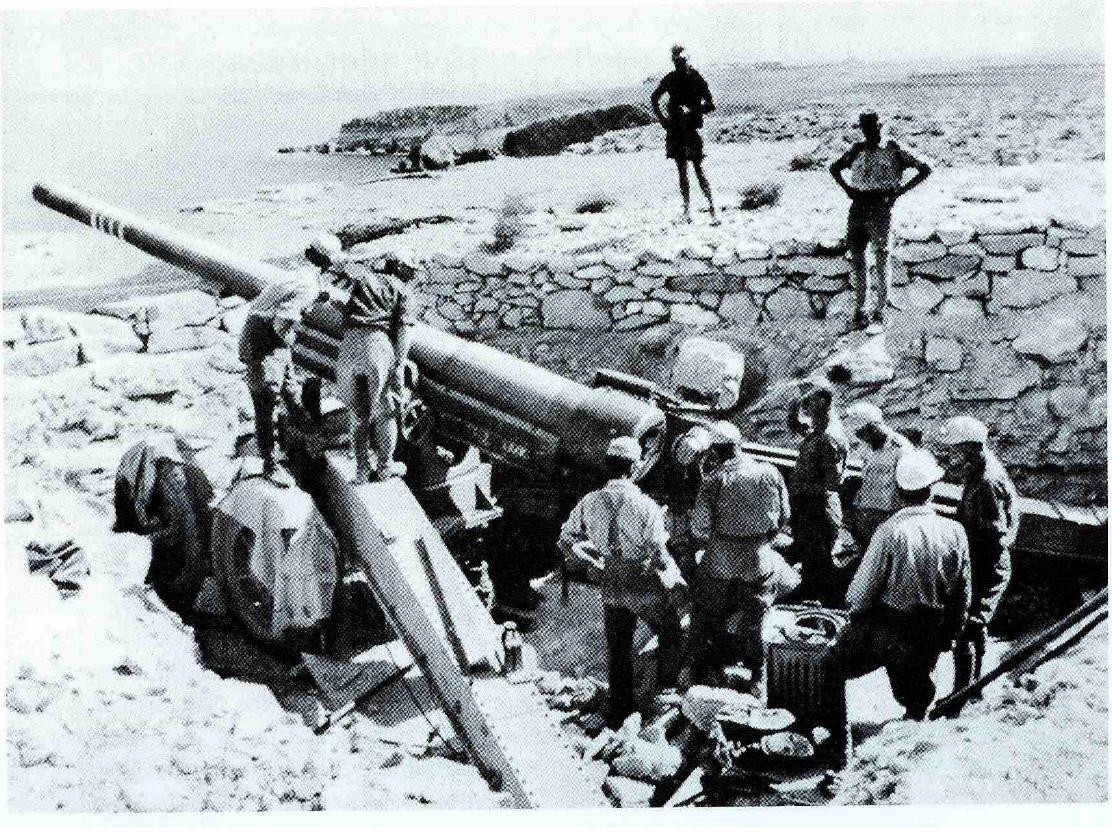
At this time, the Bf 109 fighter force in North Africa, still comprising the three *Staffel* of I./JG 27 under *Major* Eduard Neumann, was joined by 7./JG 26 which flew from Molaoi to Libya on this day. Neumann was to say of his visitors:

'The 7./JG 26 played a "guest role" in Cyrenaica for a short period in mid-1941. At that time my I./JG 27 was the only German fighter unit in North Africa. Its Kapitän, Oblt. Müncheberg, was allowed to plan and carry out his Staffel's missions without hindrance from me. I believe I am right in saying that the Staffel did not enjoy a lot of success in Africa, since the British advance was halted very quickly. But Müncheberg was an energetic leader; he was one of the great leaders of the Luftwaffe.'

The first operation flown by the combined units was on 15 June when they engaged Hurricanes of 73 and 274 Sqns. near Sidi Barrani and shot down five, one of them claimed by *Fw.* Karl-Heinz Ehlen of



ABOVE: Ground crew servicing 'Black 6', a Bf 109 E-7 Trop of 2./JG 27.



LEFT: After being surrounded by German forces in mid-April 1941, the Imperial garrison at Tobruk was besieged but not entirely cut off as the approach to it by sea remained open. During the period May to October 1941, Tobruk was supplied by destroyers and LCTs (Landing Craft, Tank). The LCTs were among the first to be built and were then known as 'A' Lighters. Setting out from Mersa Matruh, the lighters braved not only Stuka attacks, but also, as they passed the Bardia side of the Tobruk perimeter, this long-range coastal gun known to the Royal Navy lighter crews as 'Bardia Bill'. Despite Allied air attacks and a naval bombardment, the gun, actually a captured British 155 mm weapon, survived and it was rumoured among the British sailors that the German gunners knew the lighters' timetable a well as they did.

"When I returned to North Africa, things had changed considerably..."

FRIEDRICH KELLER, I./JG 27

I was born in 1918 in Köln and became a soldier in December 1936, serving in the artillery. Later, in October 1938, I transferred to the *Luftwaffe* and was trained as pilot in Neubiberg, Schleissheim and, finally, at the *Jagdfliegerschule* in Werneuchen. As a young trainee, I was posted to I./JG 27 in Münster. I arrived there alone and was assigned to 2./JG 27, a brand-new *Staffel* under *Oblt.* Ernst-Günther Heinze, who was soon to be replaced by *Oblt.* Gerd Framm. The two other *Staffelkapitäne* in the *Gruppe* were *Oblt.* Karl-Wolfgang Redlich who led 1./JG 27, and *Oblt.* Gerhard Homuth, commander of 3./JG 27. Both men would later have interesting careers in the *Jagdwaffe*.

On 28 December 1939 we were to transfer to Plantlünne, but because my aircraft had engine trouble I was delayed and had to take off later than my comrades. Reaching Plantlünne, I was prevented from landing straight away and, when I finally received permission, I made a perfect landing but, unfortunately, I forgot to lower my undercarriage and landed with the wheels still retracted. That was the first of five belly-landings that I would make during the war.

When the war in the West began in May 1940, we were based at Krefeld and Möchengladbach and we simply received the order to fly a combat mission. I mean, there was no official proclamation, but the invasion of France and the Western countries was not entirely unexpected. Our first sorties were *freie Jagd* missions, but we saw hardly any enemy aircraft. On 12 May, I made my second belly-landing and received a slight nose injury, [1] but on 5 June I shot down a French Morane. During the Battle of Britain, I flew a great number of missions over England, most of them being bomber escort sorties, which were not popular. I survived several air battles, claimed a Spitfire which I shot down on 11 July, and was fortunate not to have been shot down myself during these operations.

In April 1941, after a very short period of operations over Yugoslavia, I./JG 27 was withdrawn to München-Riem in order to prepare for transfer to North Africa. At that time, we received a new *Staffelkapitän*, *Hptm.* Erich Gerlitz who came to us from the *Ergänzusgsgruppe* of JG 27. We had a good *Staffel* with very good pilots: our *Staffelkapitän* was experienced and we had men like *Lt.* Kothmann, who already had several *Abschüsse*, as well as the future *Ritterkreuzträger Ofhr.* Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt, and also my friend *Fw.* Franz Elles.

Ours was the first fighter unit to be sent to North Africa. Previously, there had been only Bf 110, bomber, Stuka or reconnaissance units, and our assignment was to provide them with protection. We discovered that conditions in this theatre were far from ideal for fighter aircraft and we had no proper aerodrome, only a rough airstrip. During our advance, we often used only flat areas of ground, but this, of course, was sometimes dangerous and there were several accidents due to the primitive conditions. We had no contact with the local people apart, perhaps, from our ground personnel who needed advice on where to find water, etc. In any case, as far as I can remember, during the first weeks or months, our supply was very well organised and we never suffered lack of food, material or fuel for our aircraft.

In our neighbouring *Staffel* there was a certain *Ofhr.* Hans-Joachim Marseille who, by devising his own tactics, gradually became famous. Nevertheless, in the early months of this campaign, his *Staffelkapitän*, *Oblt.* Homuth, was much more successful. I don't know what the differences were in their victory scores, but what really set them apart from each other was their personalities. Marseille was a difficult subordinate with an independence which, in military life, could not be tolerated.

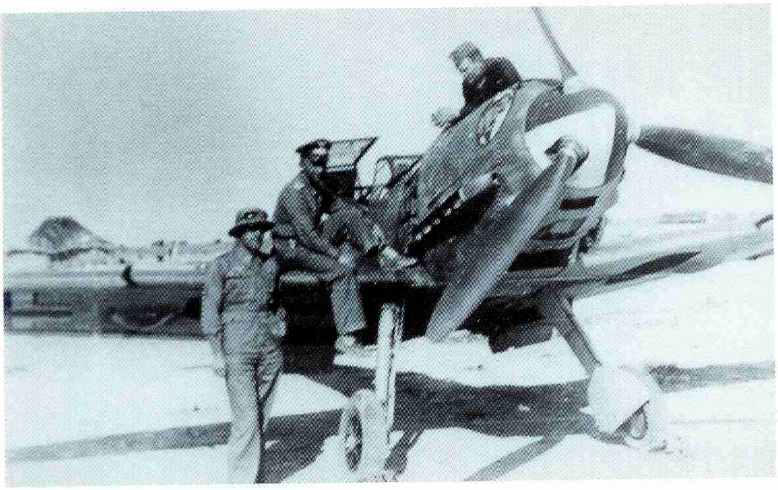
I stayed in Africa until mid-June 1941 when I was recalled to Europe in order to build up and lead a *Staffel* of *Ergänzungs Jagdgruppe 27* at Grottkau in Silesia. This training unit already consisted of a 1. *Staffel* which was to be expanded to a *Gruppe* by splitting it up and forming a 2. *Schulstaffel*, or *Ausbildungsstaffel*. I was to become the *Kapitän* of the 1. *Staffel* which was then known as the *Einsatzstaffel*, or Combat *Staffel*. In July, we moved to North Germany and then to Husum and Aalborg in Denmark. In early 1942 I was ordered back by my former *Kommandeur*, *Major* Eduard 'Edu' Neumann as the *Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 27, *Hptm.* Gerlitz, had been appointed *Kommandeur* of II. *Gruppe* and 2. *Staffel* needed a new leader. Having been with this *Staffel* since the beginning of the war, I was the most suitable officer for this position.

When I returned to North Africa, things had changed considerably. Some of my comrades had been lost, including my friend *Fw.* Elles who had been captured. In the 3./JG 27, Marseille (by then a *Leutnant*) received the *Ritterkreuz* within a few days of my return, while *Oblt.* Homuth, also extremely successful, had already received this decoration in June. Marseille had fantastic eyesight; he was able to see the enemy long before anyone else and he had devised a special attack method which only he could use. At that time, the English used to form the well-known defensive circle, where each man protects the aircraft in front and is himself protected from behind, but I flew several missions with Marseille and saw how he managed to penetrate this circle and destroy his victim so quickly that the next English pilot in the circle had no time to fire at him. Of course, only a pilot possessing extraordinary abilities could achieve this.

I claimed my third and fourth victories, two P-40s, on 8 February 1942. My fifth was another P-40 and I claimed my sixth, a Boston, on 10 March. Shortly after this, I was called back to Germany as my two brothers had been killed on the Russian front and, under existing German law, the last surviving son had to be removed from the front. Subsequently, I served in various staff-positions, e.g. as *Adjutant* in the *Jagdschule* Villacoublay near Paris, but at the end of 1943, the law regarding the last surviving son was abolished and I volunteered to return to my *Geschwader*. I called Neumann who, at that time was IA to the *General der Jagdflieger*, Galland. In less than eight days I had received orders instructing me to return to active service and ended the war as *Kommandeur* of II./JG 27.

---

1. A photograph of the aircraft, a Bf 109 E-3 coded 'Black 4', appears in Volume 1, Page 359.



ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT: These aircraft are believed to have been flown by Oblt. Friedrich Keller, the Staffelkapitän of 2./JG 27.

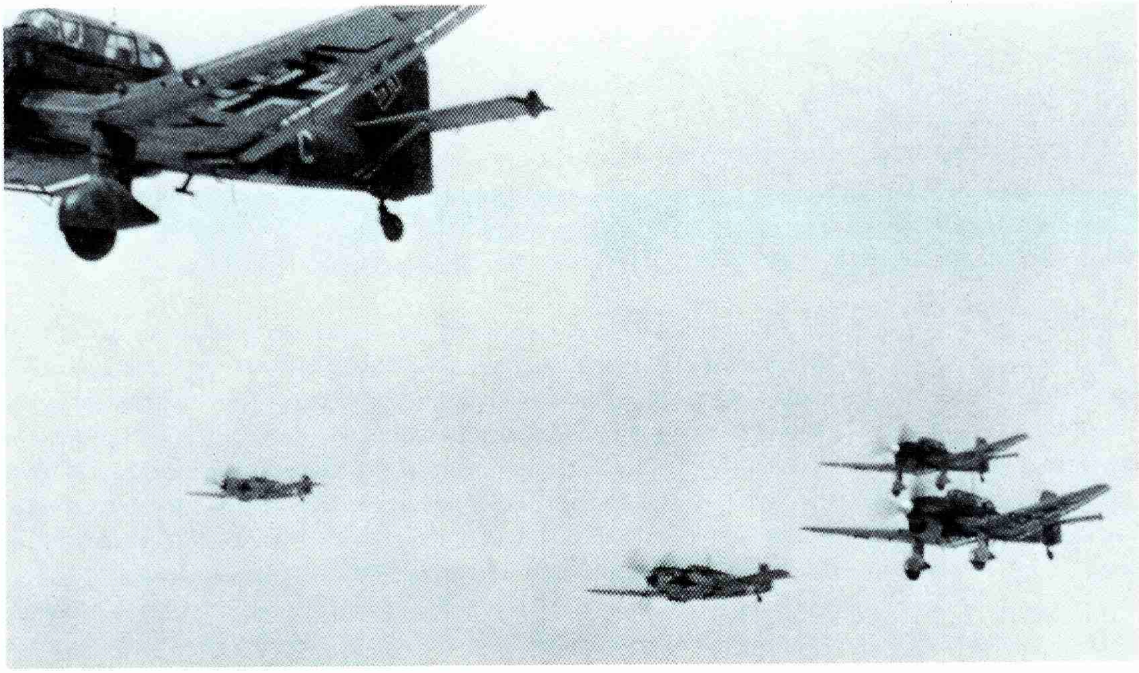
7./JG 26. Two Bf 109s from I./JG 27 were lost, the pilot of one, *Uffz.* Heinz Greuel of the 1. *Staffel*, being killed. Two days later, Lt. Heinz Schmidt of 3./JG 27 claimed four Hurricanes, Marseille two more and *Fw.* Karl Mentnich a seventh. *Oblt.* Klaus Mietusch from 7./JG 26 also destroyed a Hurricane while *Ofw.* Hermann Förster of 3./JG 27 claimed a 'Brewster', in fact probably one of the newly-arrived Tomahawks. On the 18 June, the first casualty reported by the 3./JG 27 occurred when a Bf 109 E-7 crashed near Gambut and was 40% damaged but I./JG 27 claimed three Tomahawks of 250 Sqn. Two days later *Oblt.* Müncheberg claimed his first victory in the theatre, a Hurricane east of Buq Buq.

On 23 June, I./JG 27 was reported as having 35 Bf 109 E-4 *Trops* of which 26 were serviceable. All six Bf 109 E-7s from 7./JG 26 were available but they were operating without tropical equipment. Successes for the German fighter units continued, but on 28 June, *Lt.* Heinz Schmidt of 3./JG 27 was killed in combat. On the last day of the month, Tomahawks of 250 Sqn. intercepted a formation of Ju 87s escorted by 12 Italian G.50s, ten Bf 109s from I./JG 27 and five Bf 110s from III./ZG 26. Two G.50s, two Ju 87s and two Bf 110s were shot down, but *Oblt.* Ludwig Franzisket of I./JG 27 destroyed one of the RAF fighters and another was lost to the same unit. In a later action that day Bf 109s from 7./JG 26 clashed with Hurricanes of 1 (SAAF) Sqn. and *Uffz.* Georg Mondry claimed the destruction of one, the pilot of which was killed. A Bf 109 was claimed damaged by the South African unit.

Previously, on 14 June, *Oblt.* Gerhard Homuth, *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 27, had become the first pilot in North Africa to be awarded the *Ritterkreuz.* At this time he had 22 aerial victories. On 1 July, 7./JG 26 reported a strength of 14 Bf 109s of which eight were serviceable. Eight days later *Oblt.* Karl-Wolfgang Redlich, *Staffelkapitän* of 1./JG 27 was awarded the *Ritterkreuz* after claiming 21 victories.

On 15 July, a major operation took place when Hurricanes of 73 and 229 Sqns. attacked a formation of II./St.G 2's Ju 87s escorted by Bf 109s of 7./JG 26 and Bf 110s of III./ZG 26. In the

RIGHT: When Italy declared war on Britain and France in June 1940, the Royal Air Force could muster only a handful of Gloster Gladiators, some Blenheim light bombers, plus a few Wellington and Bombay medium bombers. Here, the wreck of a Gladiator may be seen on the left, while in the centre is a P-40, early examples of which first went into action in the Western Desert in June 1941.

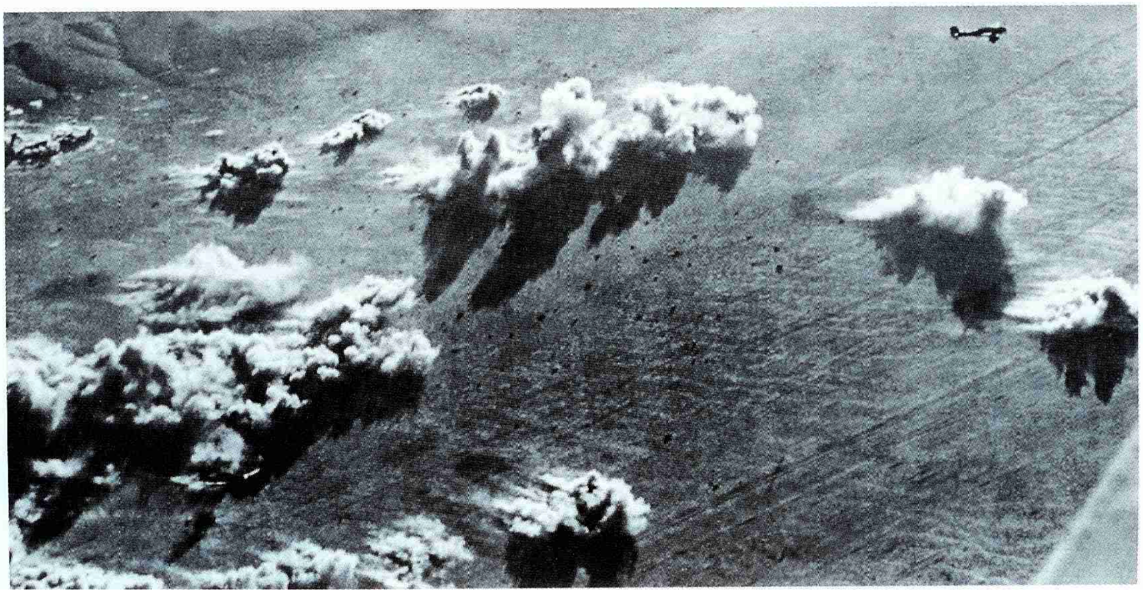


LEFT: Bf 109 Es of JG 27 escorting Ju 87s, probably belonging to II./St.G 2.

ensuing action the RAF pilots claimed six Ju 87s (three crews being killed) and a Bf 110. South-west of Ras Asaz, *Oblt.* Müncheberg shot down one of the Hurricanes which was chasing *Ofw.* Heller's Bf 110. Two days later a Bf 109 E-7 from 7./JG 26 was destroyed in a crash-landing at Derna, the cause listed as a maintenance failure. On 20 July *Oblt.* Ludwig Franzisket of 1./JG 27 became the third Bf 109 pilot to be awarded the *Ritterkreuz* in North Africa with 22 victory claims. Nine days later the destruction of five Tomahawks was claimed by 7./JG 26, the RAF losing one pilot killed, one taken prisoner and three more aircraft severely damaged.

As operations by the Bf 109 units in Africa continued into August, 7./JG 26 reported on the fourth that it had only four aircraft operational from a strength of eleven. The main problem was that the DB 601 N engines which powered most of this *Staffel's* Messerschmitts proved unsuitable and very susceptible to damage in tropical conditions. The fine desert sand found its way into everything and the heat was so intense — daytime temperatures were often in the region of 50°C (120°F) – that engines run-up for too long on the ground would often boil and petrol vaporise. It was therefore decided that aircraft powered by these engines should no longer be sent to the North African theatre.

On 21 August, three Maryland bombers from 12 and 24 (SAAF) Sqns. were shot down by Bf 109s from I./JG 27 and two by 7./JG 26, the former *Gruppe* also claiming three Hurricanes and two Tomahawks. This was the last known mission flown by 7./JG 26 in North Africa and when it returned to France at the end of the month, it had scored at least eight victories in North Africa, five of them by Müncheberg.



RIGHT: Ju 87s bombing British tanks and transport.

The Western Desert

'It was 107 degrees here yesterday, and that's quite some heat. Tanks standing in the sun go up to as much as 160 degrees, which is too hot to touch.'
Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel, letter dated 2 June 1941.

'Only sand and a few camel-thorn bushes, desolate and barren, but I am completely used to it and am happy to be here.'
Lt. Jürgen Harder, Adjutant of III./JG 53, letter dated 10 December 1941.

The area of North Africa fought over during the Second World War and referred to as the Western Desert was the comparatively narrow coastal strip running from Alexandria in Egypt, to Tripoli in Libya. Only one road ran along the coast, but virtually the whole area up to a depth inland of a few hundred miles was flat. When dry, this surface was generally good for vehicles, especially for tanks, although the strain on running gear often reduced track life and tanks broke down. Apart from a few places along the coast, there were neither towns nor villages and hence almost no civilian population to get in the way of a battle, but although the wide open spaces aided mobility and manoeuvre, there were no natural sources of food and little water. It was, therefore, the supply factor which was a major limit to free movement since the fortunes of war depend on the numbers of men which can be fed or supplied and on the amount of fuel which can be supplied to the vehicles. The war in the Western Desert has, therefore, been accurately described as a tactician's dream and a quartermaster's nightmare.

In the Western Desert, the range of temperatures varied from great heat in the daytime to almost freezing at night. In Summer, the days were extremely hot and fly-plagued and the sky from dawn to dusk was a vast brazen bowl; metal surfaces, even rifle barrels, became so hot that they blistered the hand that touched them. In Winter, while the days were bright and mild, the nights were bitter and, before dawn, temperatures might reach a point well below zero. Sometimes there were torrential rainstorms which left the ground waterlogged, put airfields out of commission and turned desert tracks into a morass impassable for vehicles.

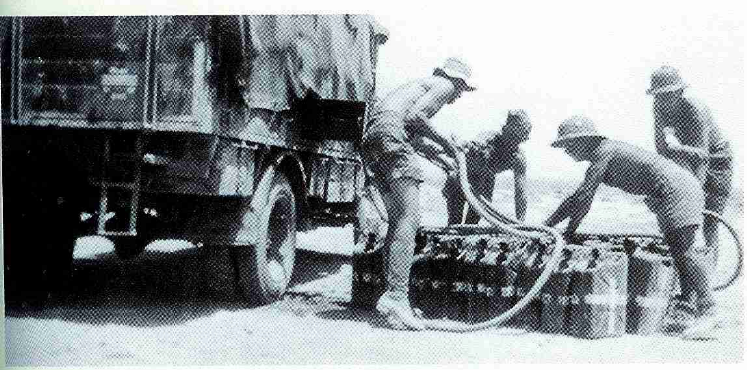
ABOVE: In Summer, there was too little water; in Winter, sometimes too much, as in this photograph of an RAF Bristol Blenheim light bomber on a waterlogged airfield in the Western Desert.

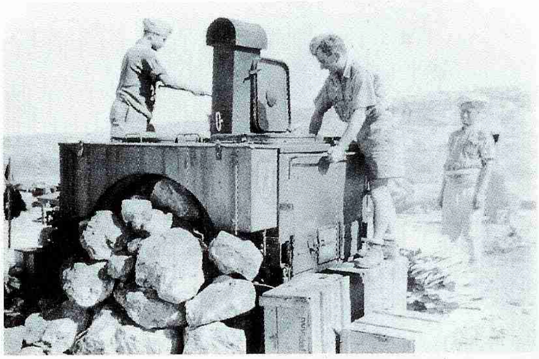
ABOVE: The Western Desert is usually associated with extreme heat, but Winter temperatures could drop to well below zero at night and the days remained cold until warmed by the sun. In this photograph, British infantry are wearing greatcoats and scarves as protection against the cold.

Providing fresh water for the troops was a major problem in desert warfare and, except for a small number of wells, fresh water came from a distilling plant. Whatever its source, it was brackish and was strictly rationed. Any water used for washing was carefully retained to fill the radiators of motor vehicles but, as Imperial troops found, there always seemed to be plenty of petrol available and many preferred to wash themselves and their clothes in this, not only to conserve water but in the belief that it helped deter fleas and lice. For Commonwealth troops, too, there was generally sufficient food, especially on the occasions when the German advances forced them to retreat to the frontier of Egypt and they were laying back close to their main artery, the Suez canal, and their supply bases in the fertile delta area of the Nile. Even after advancing into the desert, Commonwealth troops were generally well supplied although the mainstay was a monotonous diet of composite ration packs and, more frequently, hard biscuits and corned beef, better known to the British simply as 'bully'. For Italian and German troops, there was an Italian tinned meat, euphemistically known to the Germans as *Alter Mann*, or Old Man, after the initials AM, standing for *Administrazione Militare* - Military Administration - which were stamped on the lid.

Airfields in the Western Desert were merely large areas of ground scraped smooth and hard. There were no tarmac runways, no hangars, taxiways, buildings, barracks or even a control tower. Apart from a few tents and slit-trenches, most other facilities - signals, workshops, field kitchens, etc - were in specially-fitted vehicles or trailers. Damage to aircraft caused by stones and small rocks thrown up by aircraft as they taxied or took off was a constant problem, particularly to undercarriages, tail units and flaps.

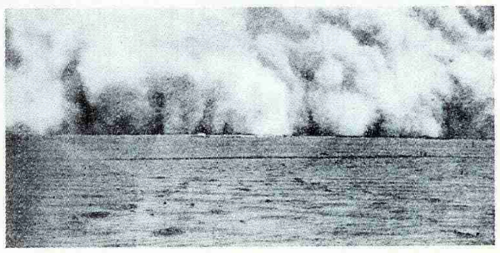
Even on a normal day, the wind was heavily charged with particles of grit which filled men's eyes, mouths and nostrils, their clothes and food, but the chief menace was the dust storm. These were most frequent in the Spring when the *khamsin*, a hot, strong wind from the south, laden with dust, turned daylight into a gloomy twilight in which visibility was severely reduced and brought hours of gritty misery.



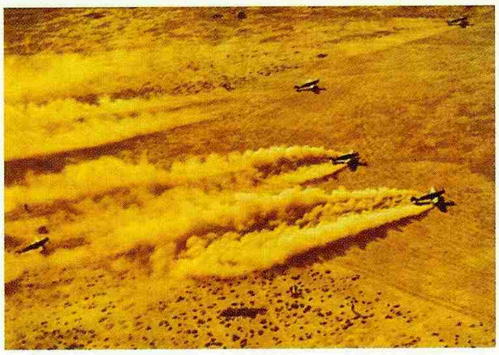


LEFT: Like everything else in North Africa, cooking facilities were primitive. This field kitchen belonging to II./JG 27 has had its wheels removed and is supported on a pile of boulders.

ABOVE: Unlike the flimsy sheet metal container used by the British and which was easily damaged and inclined to split at the seams and spill its contents, the German fuel and water container was made from pressed steel and was much stronger. Indeed, so successful was the design that it was later copied and manufactured by the British and Americans as the famous jerrycan. Here, ground personnel are seen filling water cans, easily distinguished from those used for fuel by the white cross painted on the sides.



ABOVE AND BELOW: Sand and dust clouds, whether due to such natural causes as the sandstorm above, or by aircraft slipstreams is well illustrated in these photographs. The view below shows Bf 109's taking off.



The ever-present problem of sand was one of the adverse conditions that faced all forces fighting in the Western Desert and placed a mechanised army and the air forces at a serious disadvantage. It very quickly choked engines and contaminated bearings, rapidly shortening the life of valuable vehicles and aircraft. Indeed, such was the effect of dust and sand on serviceability that, on 3 July 1942, the HQ of *Fliegerführer Afrika* reported that *'the lasting effects of sand damage on aircraft parts has created a situation which can only be termed critical.'*

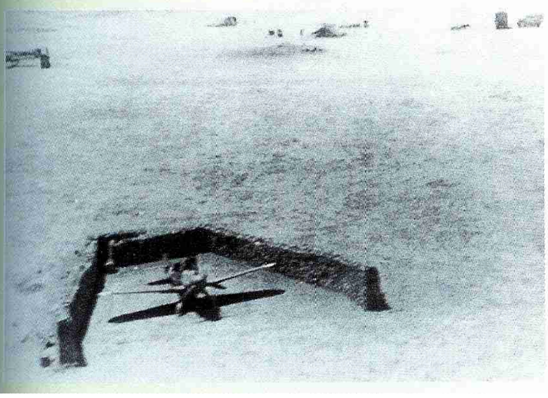
While the scenery in much of the desert was mostly a monotonous, dun-coloured plateau, scorched by driving sand and where only camel-thorn struggled to survive, it had such compensations as the African night sky, the brilliant moon, or the fantastic beauty of a new dawn. In Spring, even the hardy camel-thorn bushes turned faintly green and sprouted tiny flowers, while in Cyrenaica, where the land was more fertile, many soldiers marvelled at the sudden, colourful flood of wild flowers which appeared after rain.

It has often been said that the British and Commonwealth troops became more easily acclimatised to the desert [1] than the Germans, and older German soldiers certainly do not seem to have withstood the African climate as well as the British. Hardly surprisingly, this became particularly evident when the extent of the German advances stretched their supply resources to the limit or when German supply traffic to North Africa was being sunk and food and medicines became scarce or non-existent.

Nevertheless, as the personal accounts in the main narrative will show, there were some, Germans as well as British, who were attracted by the desert, came to terms with the harsh environment and found peace in its silence and solitude and welcomed its challenge to survival. For them, particularly if they were young, life was simple, healthy and occasionally exciting. War in the desert was therefore an experience which many, particularly in the early days, found fascinating or actually enjoyable. And as their memoirs reveal, when it was all over, many looked back a little regretfully to the comradeship, to the reminiscent flavours of corned beef and hot tea brewed over a petrol fire, or AM and coffee, and few returned from the desert without some fond memory, of a circle of men sitting outside a tent under the moon, one perhaps playing an accordion or a mouth-organ.

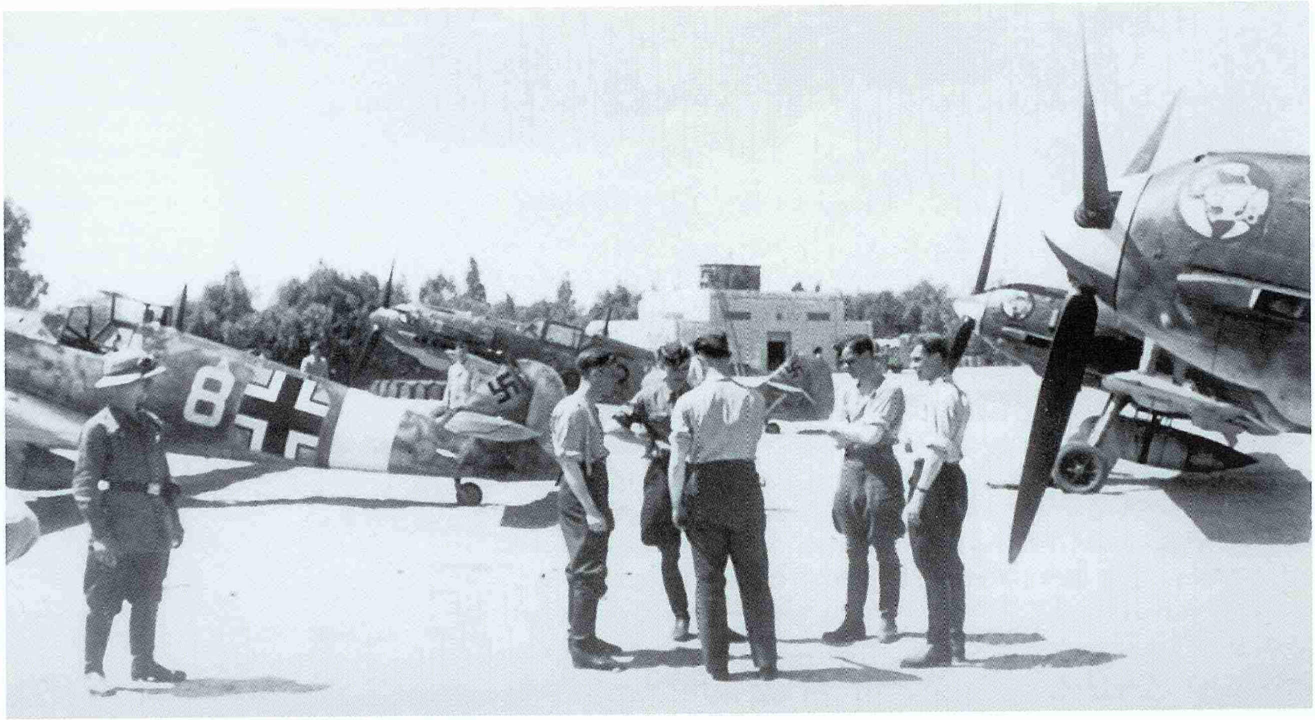
---

[1] Commonwealth troops referred to the desert as the "blue", and any venture into the desert, particularly a patrol, was known as "swanning about in the blue."

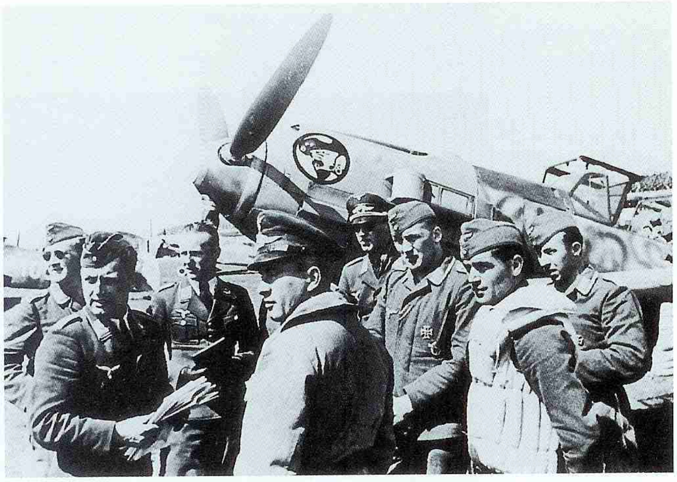


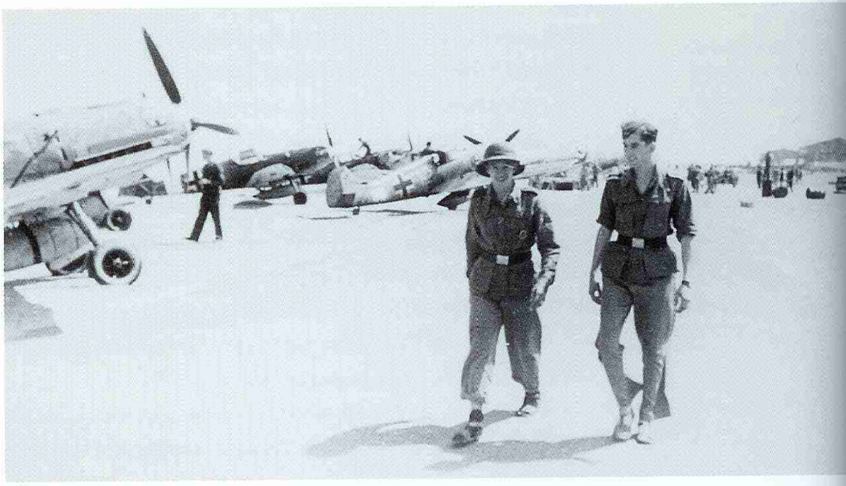
LEFT: A desert airfield was typically a large, flat area, at first with few, if any, permanent structures. However, as Allied air attacks became more effective, blast pens were constructed to protect aircraft from bomb blast and splinters.

RIGHT: Luftwaffe ground personnel, apparently rehearsing a piece of music. Living conditions in the desert were basic and troops had to find their own sources of entertainment, but many enjoyed this kind of soldiering and the comradeship which the desert engendered.

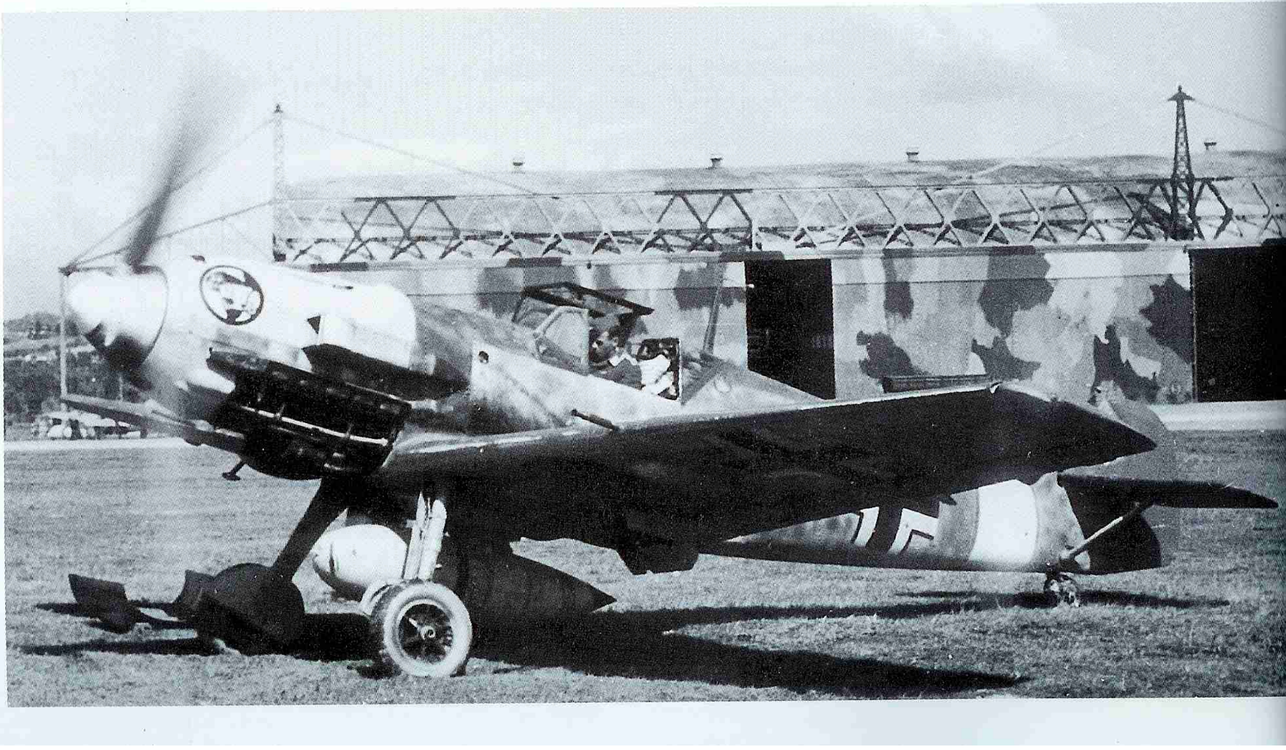


LEFT AND BELOW: Airfield scenes as 3./JG 27 prepares for the transfer flight from Sicily to North Africa. Note that all aircraft have already been fitted with sand filters.

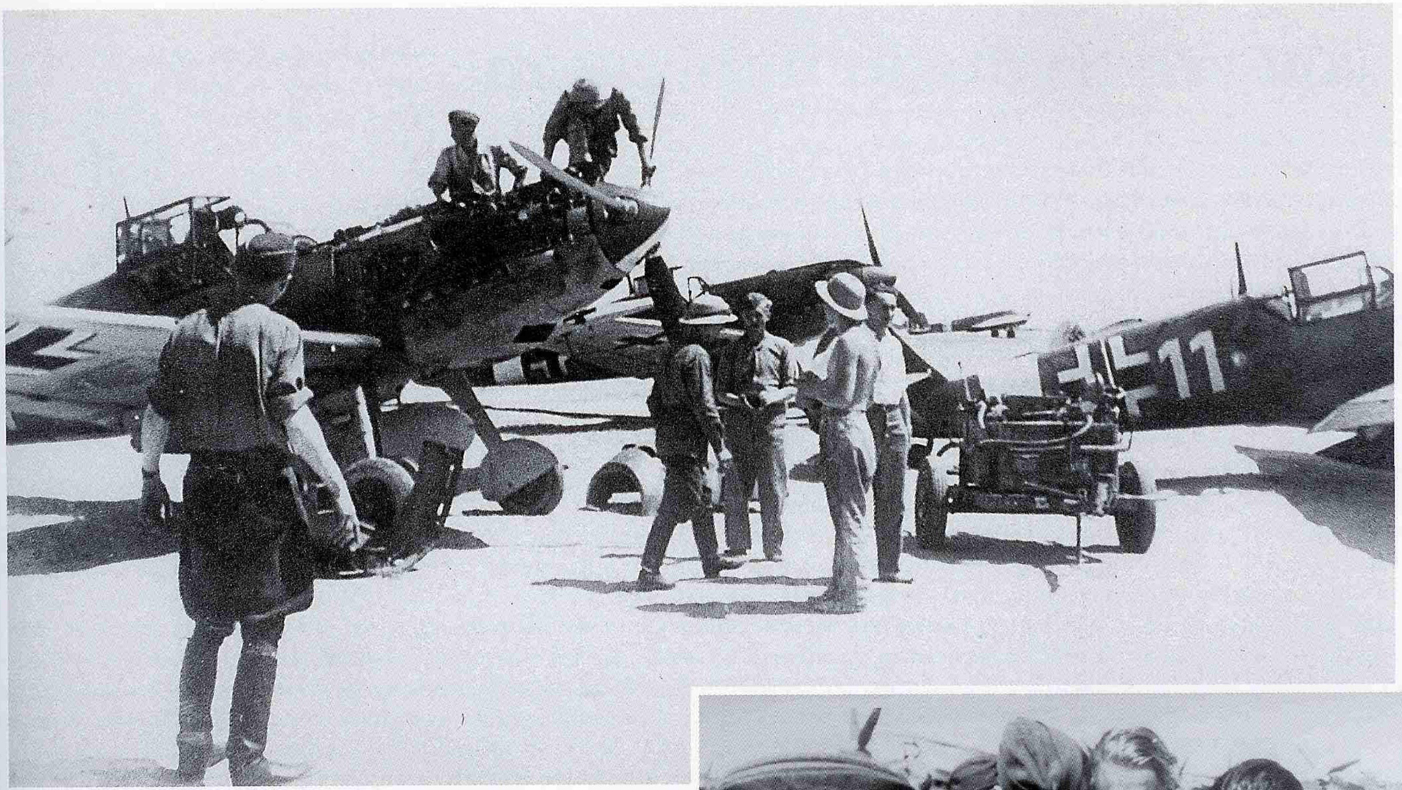




ABOVE: Pilots of 1./JG 27 before their flight to North Africa. On the extreme left is Fw. Schroer and, next to him holding papers, Oblt. Redlich, the Staffelkapitän. Second from the right is Ofw. Albert Espenlaub, wearing a life jacket.

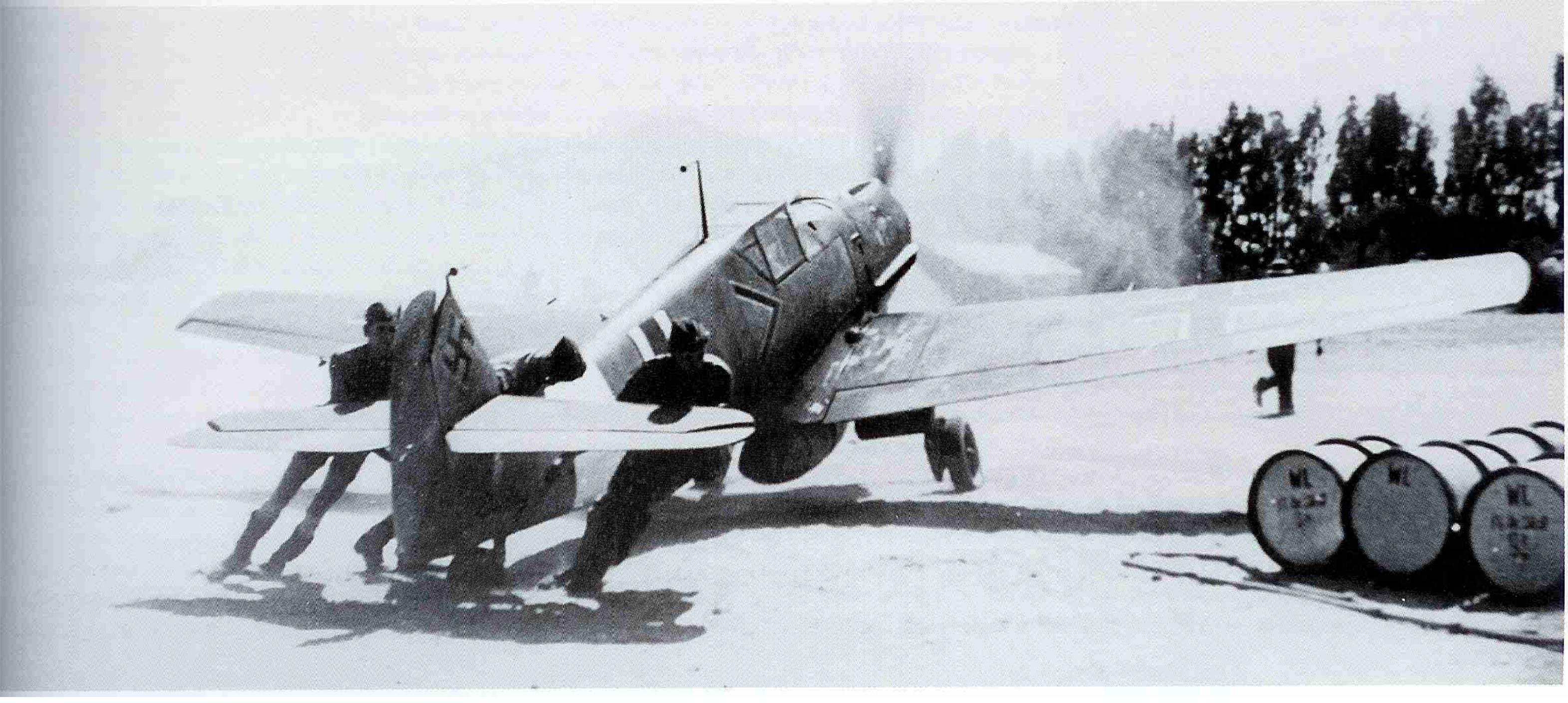


RIGHT: A Bf 109 E-7 Trop of 1./JG 27, probably photographed on Sicily before the transfer flight to Tripoli. This aircraft has retained its European grey/green camouflage scheme and has a white fuselage band and yellow cowling.



RIGHT: Pilots of 3./JG 27 study their map while (*ABOVE*) ground personnel make final preparations for the transfer flight over the Mediterranean to Tripoli.

BELOW: Three mechanics holding down the tail of a Bf 109 E-7 from I./JG 27 as it runs up its engine before taking off on the transfer flight from Sicily to Tripoli, April 1941. The aircraft carries the single chevron indicating that it was normally flown by the Gruppenadjutant.



"If you are trying to impress me..."

FRIEDRICH KÖRNER, JG 27

Friedrich Körner joined 2./JG 27 as an officer candidate in July 1941. He claimed his first victory, a P-40 south-east of Sollum on 12 October 1941 and thereafter became very successful as a fighter pilot. He claimed multiple victories on several occasions and on 26 June 1942 claimed five. His last was a Hurricane claimed on 3 July 1942, bringing total to 36 kills. The next day he and five other Bf 109 pilots were preparing to attack a bomber formation when they were attacked by 1 SAAF Sqn. Lt. Körner was shot down, baled out, and parachuted into captivity as a PoW. He was subsequently awarded the German Cross in Gold on 21 August 1942, and the Ritterkreuz on 6 September. The accompanying photograph shows Körner at Martuba earlier in 1942.

I was born on 24 January 1921 in Schwerte. While I was growing up, I became very excited by the stories of such First World War pilots as Richthofen and Boelcke, and at the end of the 1920s there appeared many books and films covering their exploits. The film entitled '*Der Grosse Kampfflieger*', which was about von Richthofen, had a particular influence on me and, despite my mother's wishes, when the formation of the *Luftwaffe* was announced in 1935, I saw an opportunity to serve my country as an officer in that branch of service. I felt then that I could achieve more as a fighter pilot, a solitary combatant, rather than as part of a flight crew.

I entered the *Luftwaffe* on 15 November 1939 as an officer candidate. I received the normal training and was awarded my A, B1 and B2 flight certificates at the flight school at Oschatz. I was then assigned to *Jagdfliegerschule 1* at Werneuchen/Berlin, where I received my fighter training. On 1 January 1941, I was sent to the *Ergänzungs Gruppe* of JG 27 in Oldenburg. Here, I received very intensive and excellent training. This included about 200 hours on the Me 109, with which we flew every conceivable type of manoeuvre. On 4 July 1941 I was assigned to I./JG 27 in North Africa.

When I arrived in Africa I was assigned to 2./JG 27 under *Hptm.* Erich Gerlitz, whom I had known at the *Ergänzungs Staffel* in Oldenburg. This meant that settling down in the *Staffel* was made that much easier because I understood his personality. Gerlitz was an Austrian officer who had entered the *Luftwaffe* when Austria became part of the *Reich*. The Austrians were an outstanding group of pilots who were well trained and able to master their aircraft in an exemplary manner. Gerlitz had told me that he was a *Staffel* commander in the Austrian Air Force and, as aerobatics were emphasised in the Austrian Air Force, had flown highly manoeuvrable Fiat aircraft. He was a great pilot and had many years of experience behind him. He had the instinct of a fighter and, as I flew many missions when he personally led the *Staffel*, I can say from personal experience that he led in an outstanding manner. He was well liked by his subordinates and was fortunate in having in his *Staffel* some well-disciplined individualists who all had exceptional eyesight. *Fw.* Franz Elles, *Lt.* Willi Kothmann and *Ofw.* Hermann Förster are good examples, but excellent eyesight is only half the story; the advantage goes to whoever sees the enemy first. I remember engagements when Förster first saw the enemy as small specks. He would report this to the *Staffel* commander who would then manoeuvre the *Staffel* to gain a superior altitude and, with the sun behind us, carry out the first attack. Gerlitz's outstanding success as a *Staffel* leader is confirmed by the fact that he was later promoted to command the II. *Gruppe*. I liked him very much and was very sad to hear later of his death.

The *Gruppe* had already been in Africa for about three months when I arrived and the attitude of the older, more experienced pilots to the arrival of a newcomer was interesting. Fighter pilots are quite individualistic and each must have his own set of values, so the pilot who allows himself to be influenced by other pilots will have a difficult time. It is not a question of the new pilot finding himself at the bottom of a hierarchy and trying to move up by gaining recognition when he scores his first kill. Rather, it is a question of his personality, which means he must possess not only the drive to carry out his role in the unit, but also the will, the ardour or élan to succeed in combat, and this will become obvious within the *Staffel*. Later, when I commanded the *Staffel*, I could recognise this characteristic in new pilots coming to us from Germany. One could immediately see whether the new pilot was a fighter or one who had to be led and who would be a good wingman. There were many with excellent vision who never scored any kills on their own but who were excellent wingmen, clearing the tail of the element leader. On the other hand, there were new pilots who possessed a very strong will and who scored their first kill during the first ten sorties. So, whether one was recognised and accepted or not in the unit depended mostly on one's own personality.

In general, we did not have all the equipment necessary to sustain ourselves in Africa, but we had excellent mechanics and maintenance personnel who, through improvisation, overcame all the minor problems encountered. In Germany, we had received our tropical uniforms and equipment, and we also received briefings on conditions in Africa. For example, at dusk we were to dress warmly in fur collar jackets and flannels. The aircraft were modified for tropical standards as Me 109 E *Trop* and F *Trop*, with an air filter attached to the supercharger intake. This would be closed while taking-off and landing and would be opened in flight, but only if there were no sandstorms. Occasionally, we had problems with sand getting into the landing gear mechanism so that the undercarriage refused to retract, or sometimes sand entered the weapons so that they failed to cock. If someone could not retract his landing gear, he simply flew back to base.

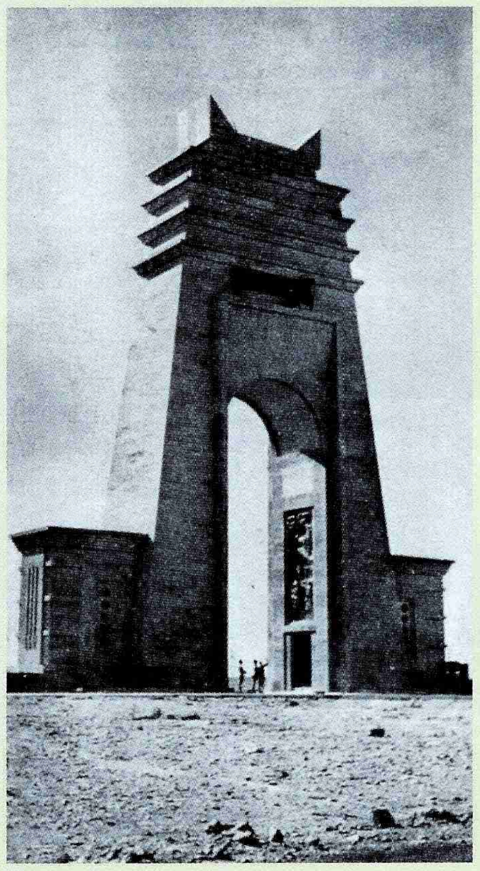
Our food supply in North Africa was dependent on the efforts of the Italians who were not very knowledgeable regarding the types of food to eat when one climbs to 8-9,000 metres several times a day. One should not consume leguminous plant foods such as beans or peas, because these cause stomach cramps, and although this was not a major problem and did not curtail the number of sorties flown, it did cause discomfort at altitude. We never lacked food or water and the climate did not cause any severe difficulties. We were aware of the intense heat of the day and the cold of the night. When we lay in the sun during the day, we protected ourselves and always covered our heads. Of course, there were some who failed to follow this advice and who sustained sunburn, heat exhaustion or mild sunstroke as a result. We had no injuries which led to absenteeism and I was never sick in Africa.

Flying in Africa was rather simple, even during sandstorms, as we usually received adequate warning and then neither we nor the enemy took to the air. On the few, rare occasions when we were surprised by sandstorms, visibility would be limited mainly to the front of the aircraft and although we could see downwards, difficulties with orientation could result. This was overcome by simply flying north until the coast was reached and where the sandstorm stopped. We would then fly along the coast to the west, where there were recognisable features, and then return to base. We were fortunate in that we generally stayed at one place for a long time and so had no difficulty recognising our base although, during our rapid advance towards El Alamein, we stayed at a landing ground for only a day or two. On one mission during the retreat at the end of 1941, at the Arco Philaenorum where the triumphal arch over the Via Balbia was located, I was surprised by a sandstorm, but above the dust cloud I could see the two prominent points on the top of the monument and the *Staffel* landed safely. I am not aware of any losses due to sandstorms.

We got along well with the members of the other two *Staffeln* and flew missions together; Stuka escort, reconnaissance escort and fighter sweeps. There was a rivalry between us concerning which *Staffel* scored more kills and who had suffered the least losses, but co-operation was outstanding. The *Kommandeur,* 'Edu' Neumann, had to allocate various missions to the *Staffeln*, but he was always fair regarding the rotation of assignments and which *Staffel* should be available for early readiness.

A new pilot arriving at the front would first be tutored by an experienced pilot. The first flight was for the purpose of learning the lessons of combat, and an element of two aircraft would take off for a flight in order that the experienced pilot could show the newcomer what he needed to know to survive. I remember my experience when I flew my first sortie with *Lt.* Willi Kothmann who had several kills and around 100 combat sorties to his credit. I flew as his wingman and he showed me the surrounding area of the airfield, the coast between the Gulf of Bomba and Tobruk, and the reaction of the heavy flak at Tobruk. We were flying at 6-7,000 metres and constantly changed our altitude. Suddenly, there were 90 mm flak bursts all around us. In this situation, Kothmann told me what to do; when to dive, when to pull up or when to fly to the side. We continued flying in the direction of Sollum and he pointed out the border between Libya and Egypt where there were several desert fortresses. That was my first sortie and although there was no contact with enemy aircraft, the first engagements with the enemy always leave a strong impression.

My second and third sorties were as escort to Stukas. The formation was large with the Stukas dive-bombing a convoy which was bringing supplies to Tobruk and which was protected by large formations of English fighters. There was a tremendous air battle with numerous dogfights. *Ofw.* Förster, who was flying to the right of me, shot down a Hurricane. Everything happened so quickly and I know that I flew straight and level for several seconds, which is the one thing I should not have done. I was so fascinated by the enemy aircraft going down that I forgot about everything else around me and lost sight of both of the element leaders of the flight. However, I immediately rejoined the flight and was relieved when we all made it back to the base.



ABOVE: Arco Philaenorum, the Italian triumphal arch which stood on the border between Cyrenaica and Tripolitania, was also the location of a German airfield. Note the two points at the summit which, if visible during a sandstorm, allowed German aircraft to locate their nearby aerodrome. The arch was known to British and Commonwealth troops as 'Marble Arch'.

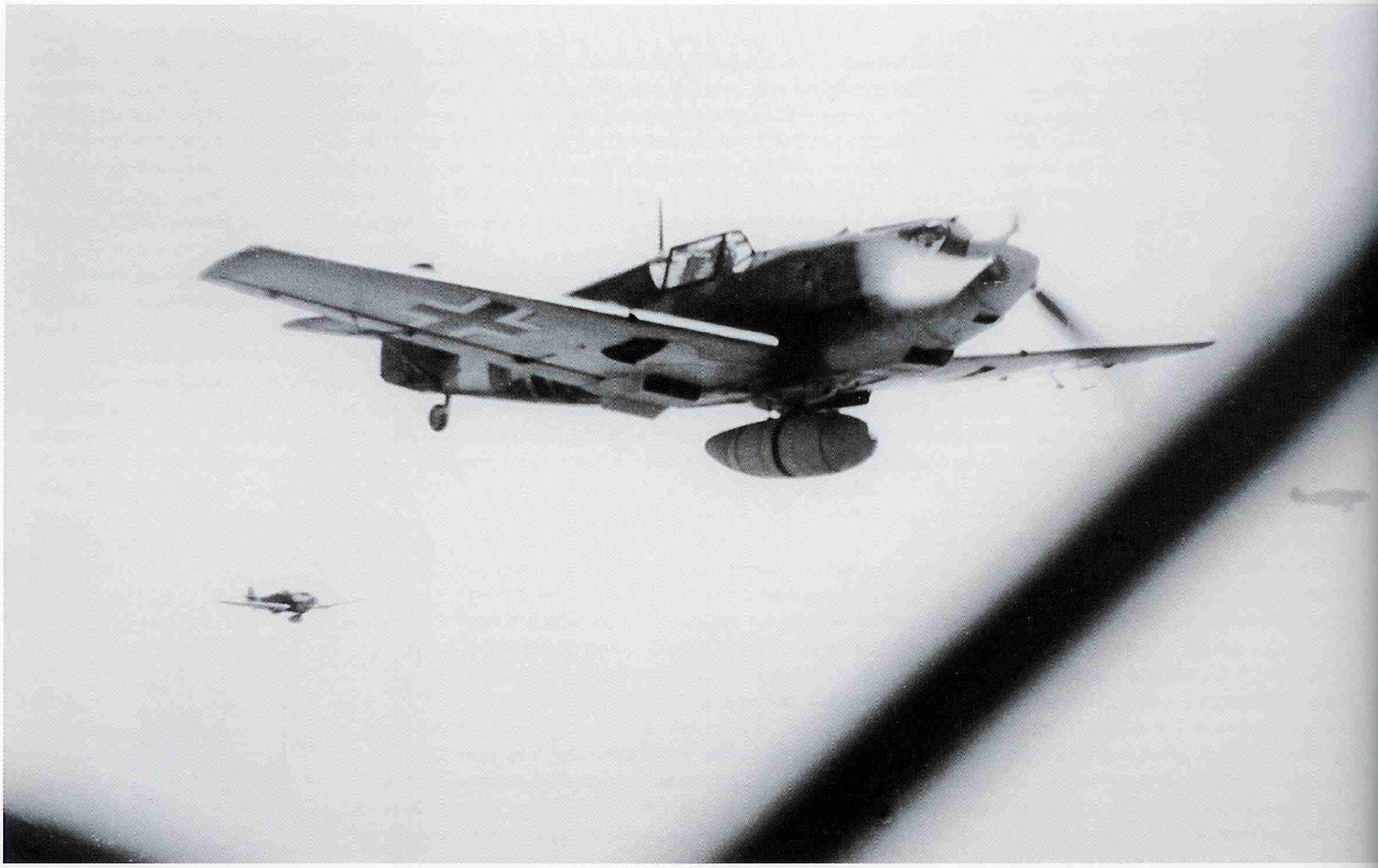
I scored my first kill a short time later, on 12 October 1941. We were following a single English aircraft and I was flying to the left and in echelon behind my element leader when the Englishman suddenly made a turn which positioned him right in front of me. It was an easy kill. I saw him turn and pass through my gunsight. I aimed several lengths ahead of him, just letting him fly into my burst of fire, and shot him down. It was a Curtiss P-40. My impression of air combat between two fighters is the tremendous speed at which it takes place. A discussion which followed indicated that he who sees the opponent first has the advantage and he who shoots first also has the advantage. If necessary, he who engages in a defence manoeuvre may also have the advantage. It is important who is first. My first kill was not very impressive. It went the way I had been trained. Some of my later kills were quite different. There were air combats which lasted some twenty minutes, or longer, and involved excellent opponents who fought with all they had until the very last.

Although we lost some pilots and aircraft, our losses in Africa were small. The bomber and Stuka losses were heavier than ours but in comparison with the losses of the English, ours were minimal. In Africa, we were outnumbered by the British and I have been engaged in air combats where we were two, four or six against 30 or 40 English fighters. We had outstanding training and I really liked the '109 F. We had pilots with the qualities of Marseille, Franzisket, and Homuth and our wingmen were very good.

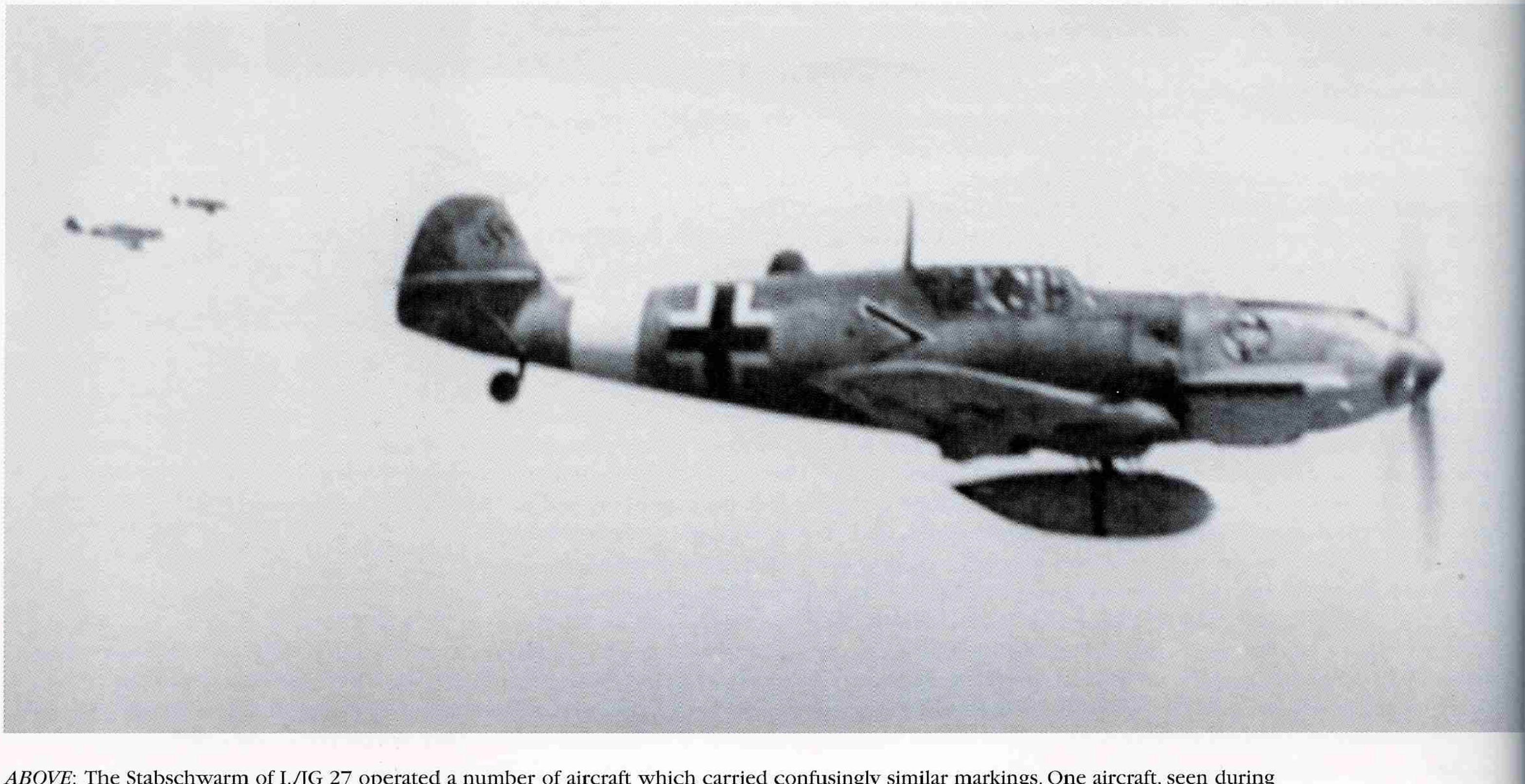
'Edu' Neumann was a very good pilot and an excellent leader with uniquely outstanding personal characteristics. In early 1942, after I had taken command of a *Staffel*, we had contact with an enemy formation which, although superior in numbers, was evidently short on fuel since it refused combat.[1] They immediately flew back towards their base and, in the heat of the moment, I suddenly found myself with my wingman in the middle of the British formation, now preparing to land on its airfield. If I had tried to break contact, their covering flight would have attacked me, but a comrade who was flying higher spotted me and said, "Stay calm. If anything happens, I'll come down and help you." Ahead of me was a British aircraft. Because of my higher speed I was gaining on him, so I closed the throttle in order not to overshoot. When he lowered his flaps and his landing gear in preparation for the landing, he was sitting right in my sights. All I had to do was open fire and the enemy aircraft crashed and burned. Back at our base I reported this kill to Neumann, who was the *Gruppenkommandeur*. I stated that I had shot down a Curtiss while it was landing with its unit. Neumann said, "If you are trying to impress me with such a risky kill, you are sadly mistaken. Such kills don't impress me at all. In the future, please refrain from undertaking such risks. Thank you." This was an indication of his personality and his concern over his pilots undertaking unnecessary risks. I could easily have been seen by the rest of the formation and shot down. I was impressed by this kill, but my *Kommandeur* was not and I did not take any more unnecessary risks.

---

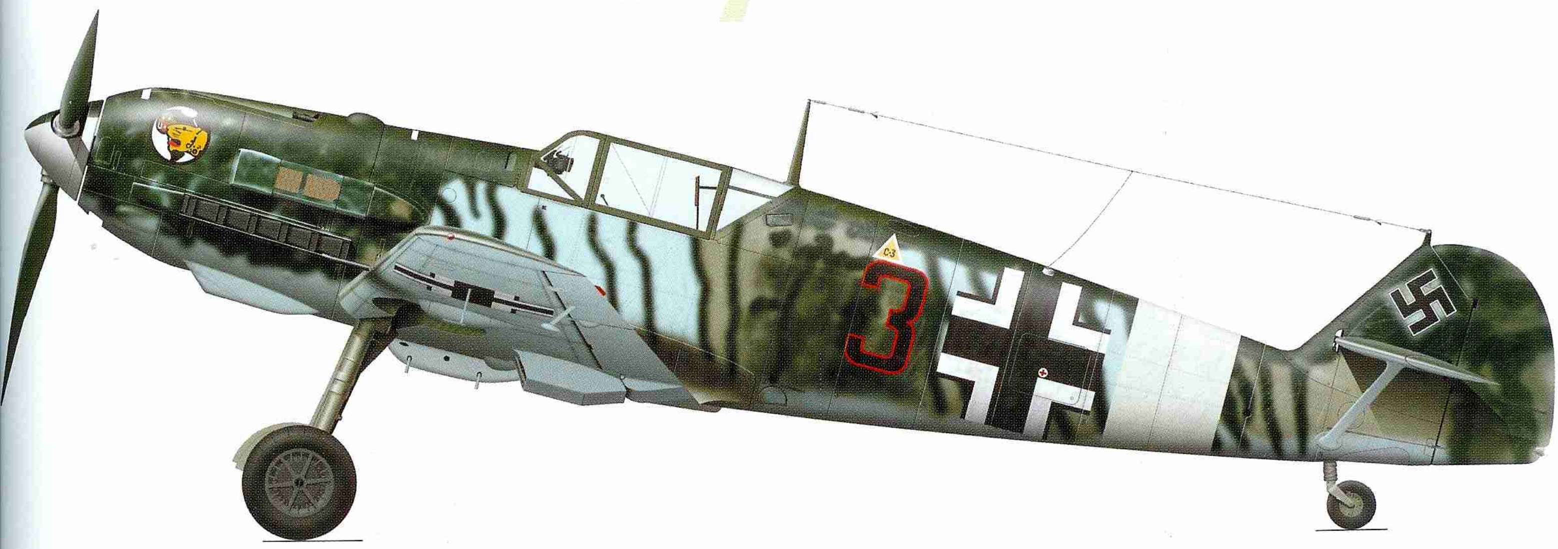
[1] The date of this incident is believed to have been 13 February 1942.



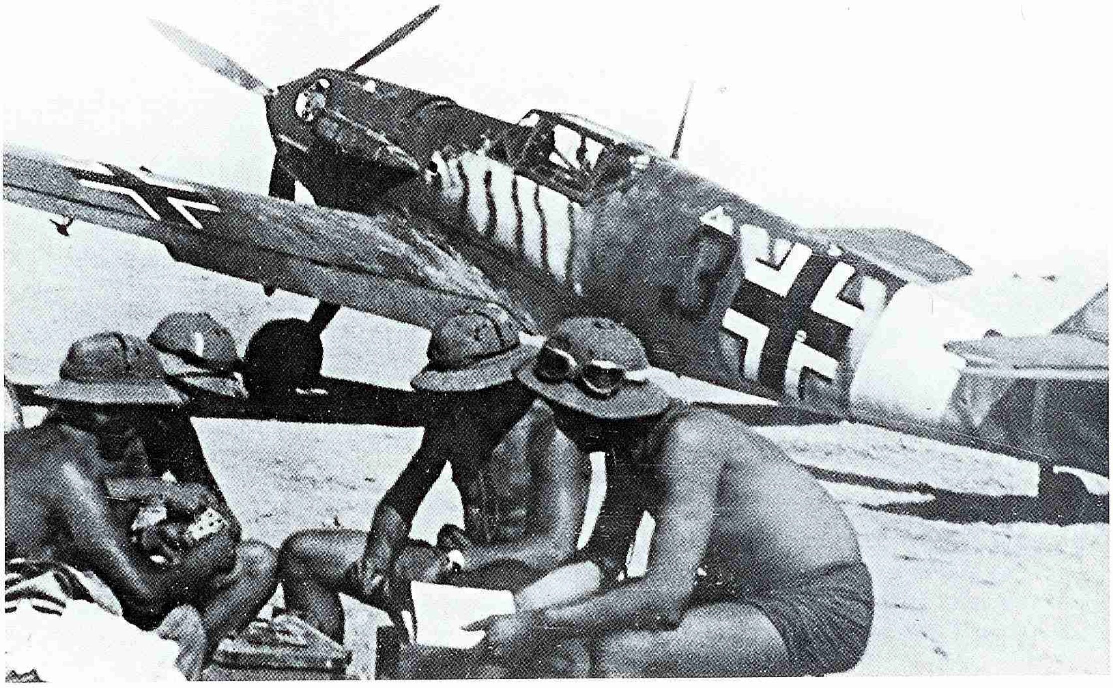
ABOVE: The fact that this Bf 109 is carrying an auxiliary fuel tank suggests the photograph was probably taken during the ferry flight from Sicily to North Africa.



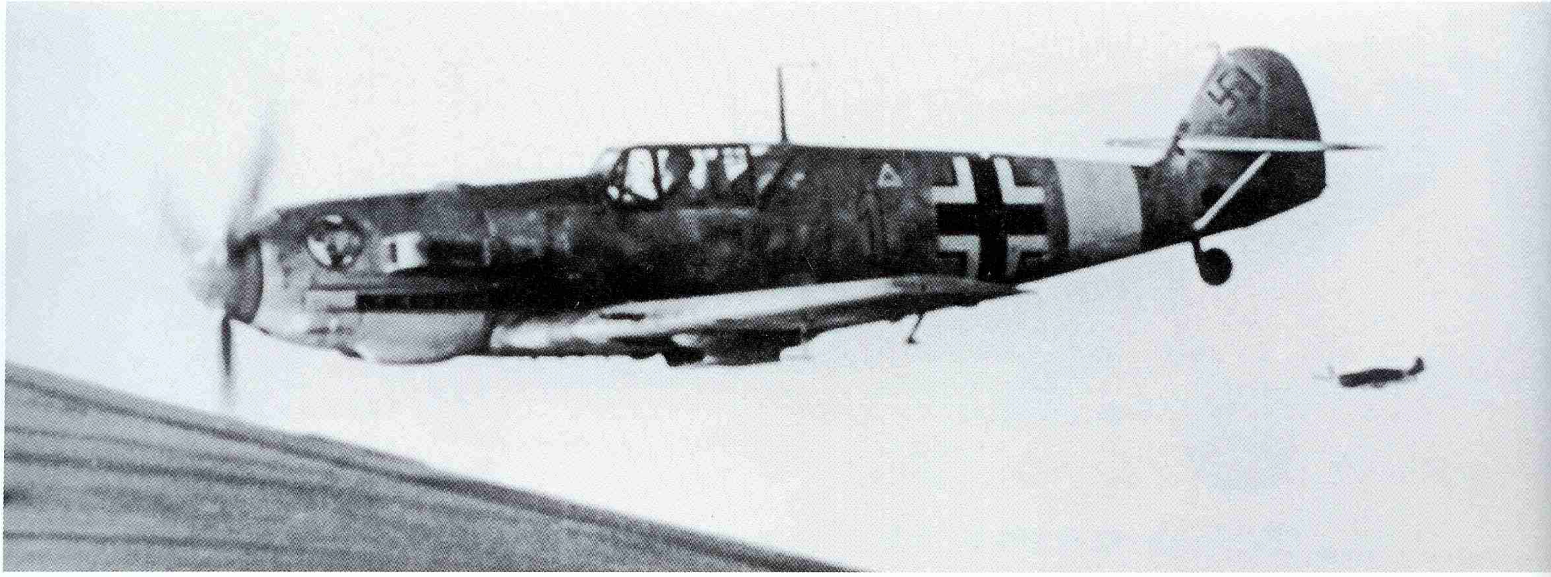
ABOVE: The Stabschwarm of I./JG 27 operated a number of aircraft which carried confusingly similar markings. One aircraft, seen during a transfer flight from Gela to North Africa, was marked with a Stab chevron with another, smaller, chevron, rotated through 90 degrees within it thus >.This aircraft should not be confused with that flown by Oblt. Ludwig Franzisket, shown elsewhere, which was marked > and on which the thickness of the white outline to the black markings was different.



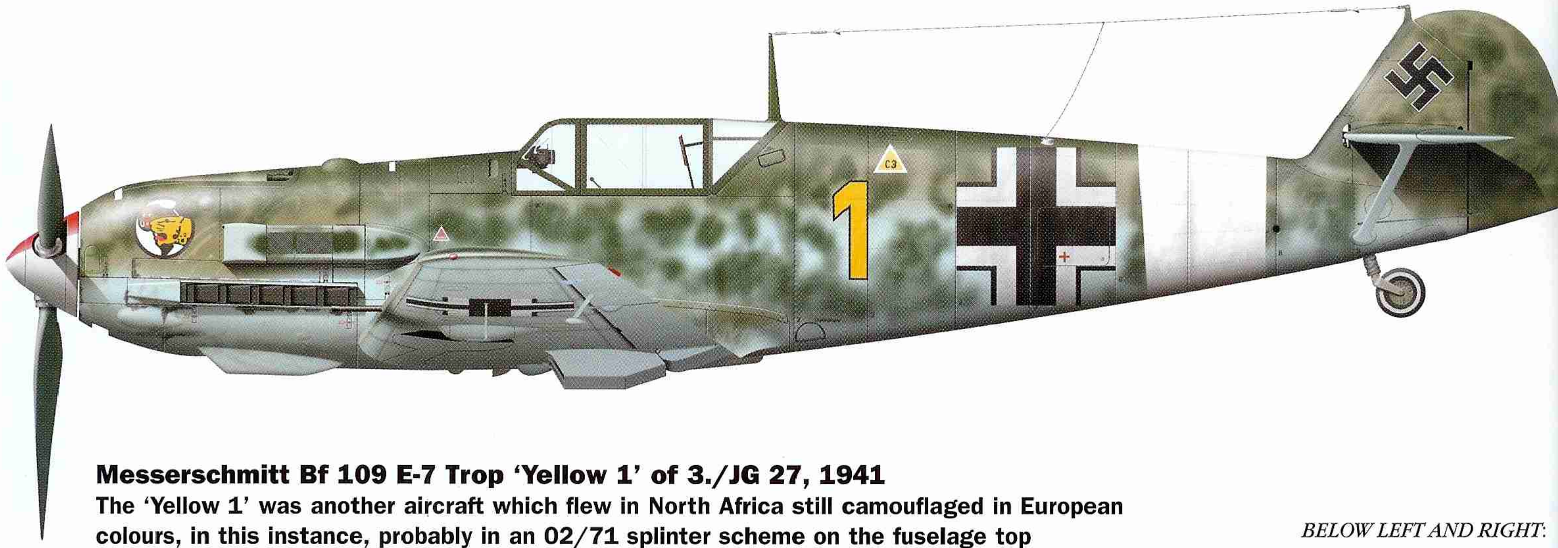
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop 'Black 3' of 2./JG 27, Gazala, 1941
The camouflage colours and the pattern on this aircraft are unusual. Apart from the fading on the wing uppersurfaces as remarked in the caption to the photographs, the 02/71 has been greatly modified. Areas of 02 around the fuselage number show where a previous identity has been overpainted and a large area under the cockpit has also been repainted in a colour resembling Blue 76, over which have been sprayed Green 70 stripes. The spinner was Green 70 with a white segment.



RIGHT AND BELOW: Two views of the same Bf 109 E-7 Trop, 'Black 3' of 2./JG 27, believed to have been taken at Gazala. The aircraft has retained its European colour scheme of 02 and 71 on the uppersurfaces and Blue 65 undersurfaces, but, as the marked contrast between the tone of the black Balkenkreuz and the Green 71 on the wing shows, the 71, normally a very dark colour, has bleached to a medium green.

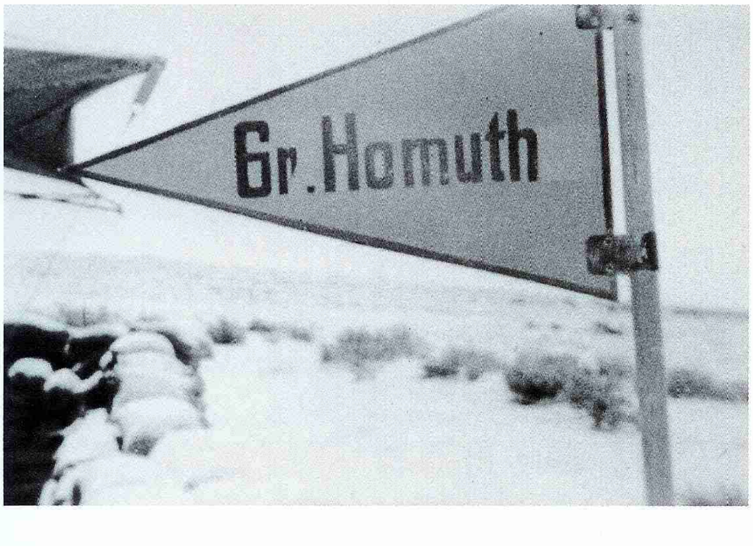


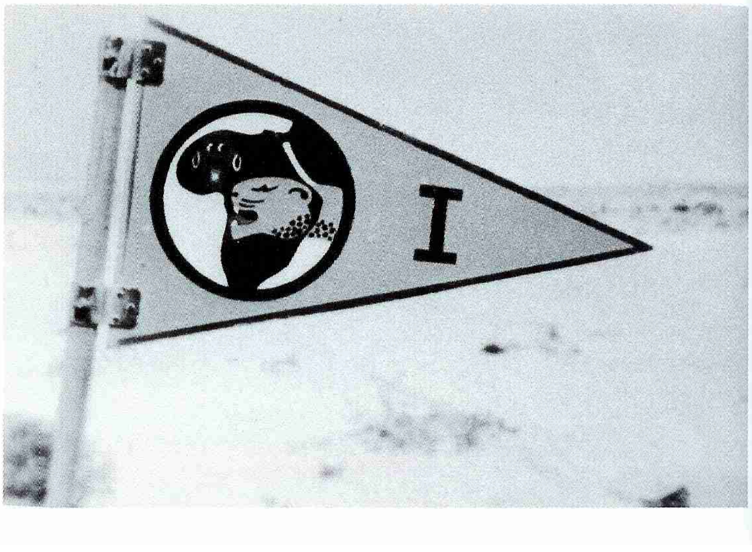
ABOVE: The most popular kind of mission among the German fighter pilots in North Africa was the freie Jagd where the more aggressive or more skilled pilots would soon be noticed and perhaps be appointed Rotten or Schwarm leader. Once in that position and with a wingman to watch their backs, such pilots had the opportunity to build up their personal scores. This photograph shows Bf 109 Es on a freie Jagd mission with 'Yellow 1' of 3./JG 27 closest to the camera. From 1 February until 1 June 1941, and then again from August 1941 to 10 June 1942, this Staffel was led by Oblt. Gerhard Homuth and it is possible that this may have been his aircraft. After 10 June 1942, Homuth became Kommandeur of I. Gruppe, which he then led until November 1942.

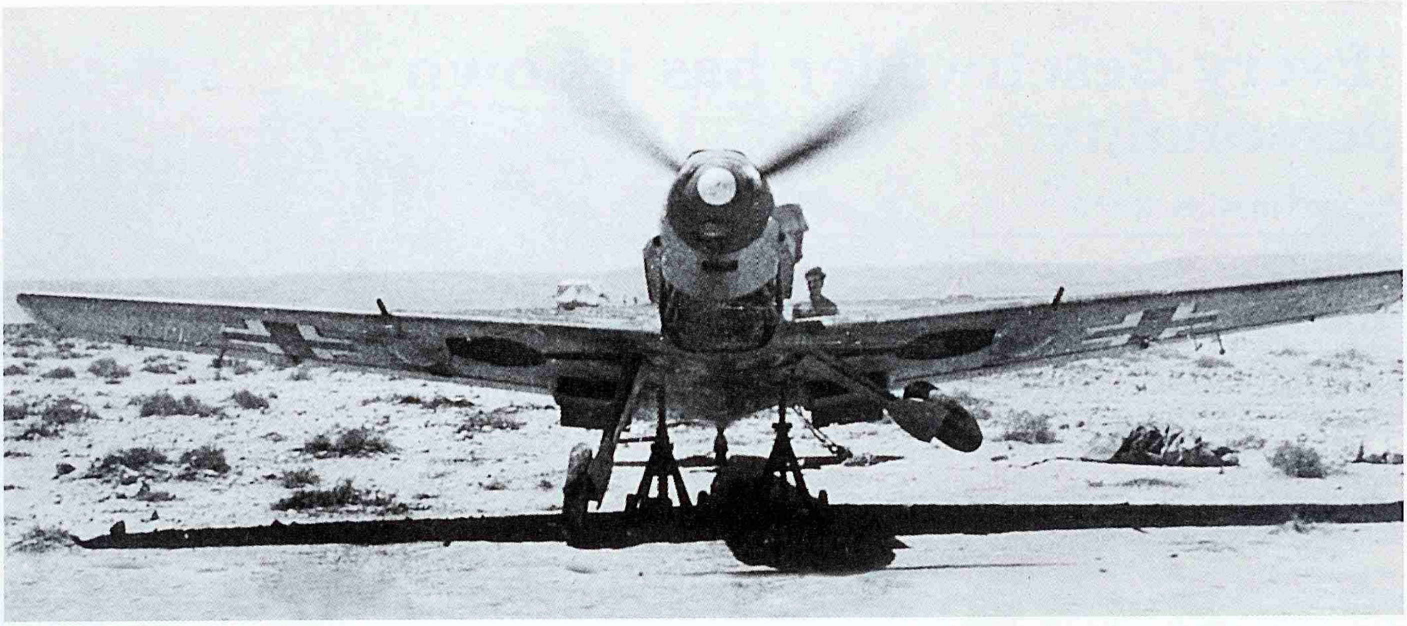


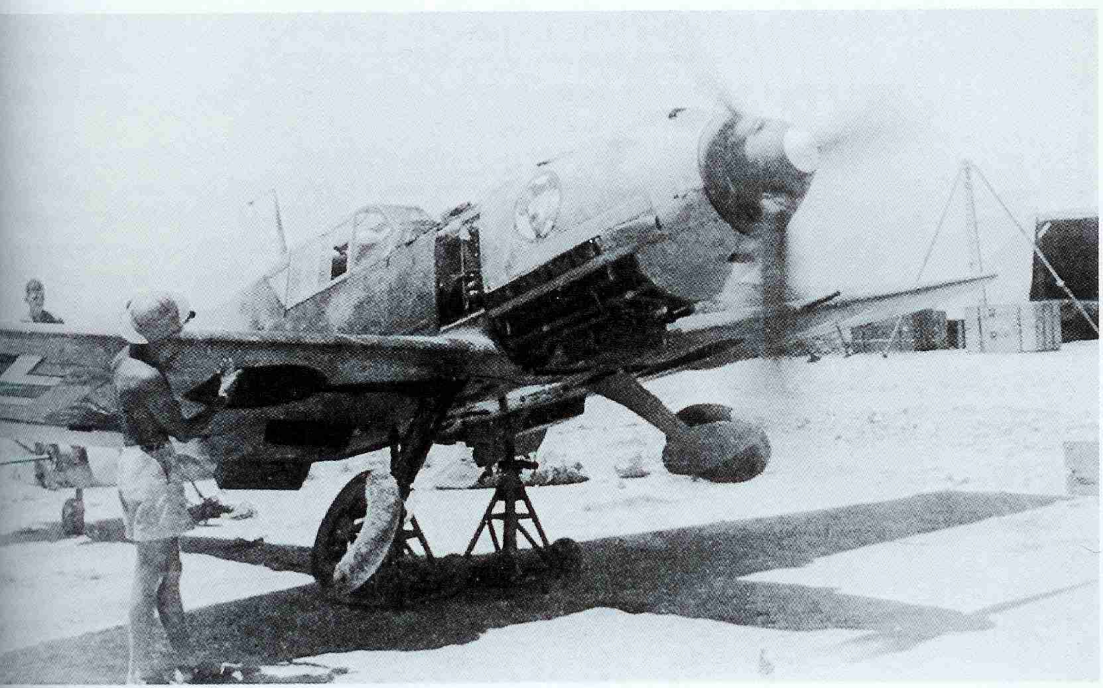
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop 'Yellow 1' of 3./JG 27, 1941
The 'Yellow 1' was another aircraft which flew in North Africa still camouflaged in European colours, in this instance, probably in an 02/71 splinter scheme on the fuselage top decking and wing uppersurfaces. The fuselage sides were heavily mottled in these same two colours and all undersurfaces were Blue 65.

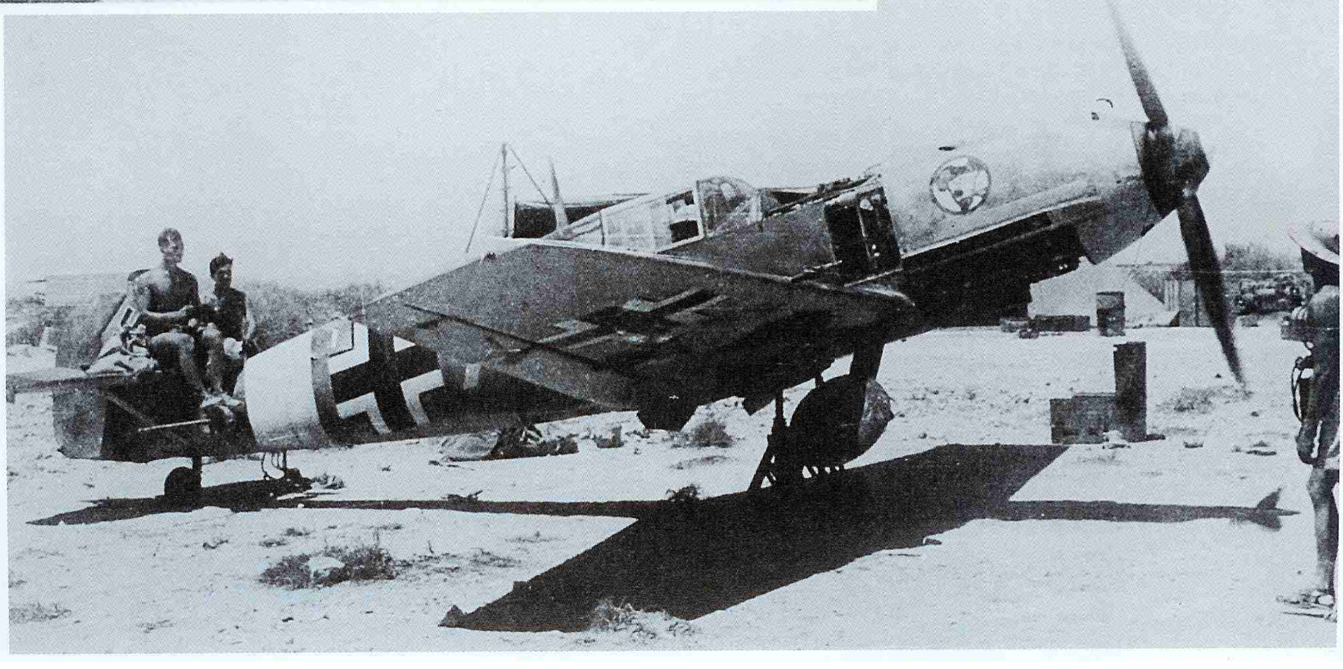
BELOW LEFT AND RIGHT: Both sides of the metal pennant used to identify the command post of the Homuth Gruppe, I./JG 27.











THIS PAGE: A series of photographs showing 'Yellow 7' of 3./JG 27 during undercarriage retraction tests in North Africa.

"Every Geschwader has its own personality"

EDUARD NEUMANN, JG 27

During the campaign in the West, I was *Geschwaderadjutant* to *Oberst* Max Ibel. He had already fought as a pioneer during the First World War, but at that time our *Stab* was distinguished by *Hptm*. Adolf Galland who showed great abilities as a promising fighter pilot.

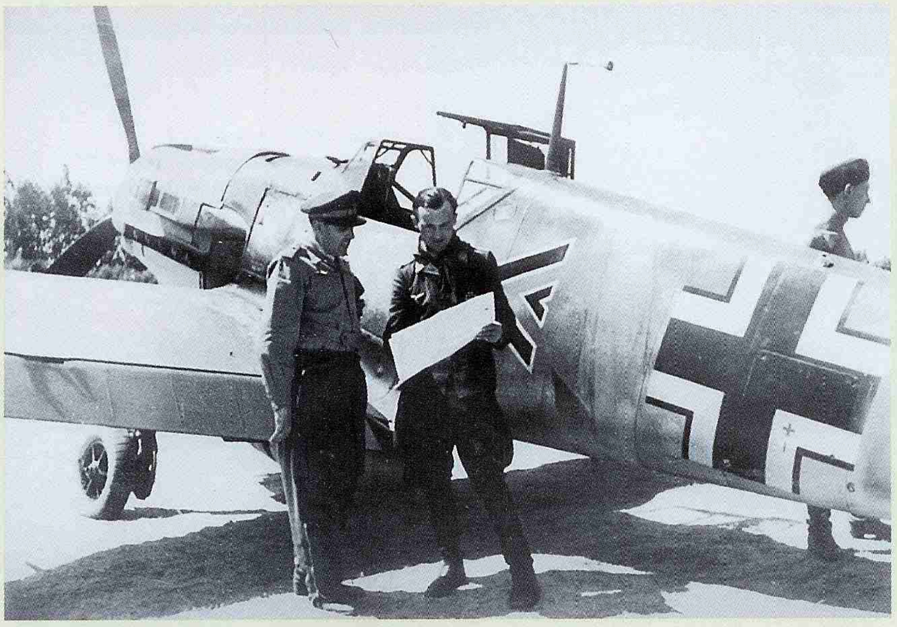
In July 1940, I became *Kommandeur* of I./JG 27 and claimed my first victory, a Spitfire, on 8 August. At the end of the Battle of Britain, I had six *Abschüsse* and one of my best pilots was *Oblt*. Gerhard Homuth, *Kapitän* of 3. *Staffel*.

We were assigned to North Africa even before the end of the Balkan campaign. We flew to Sicily and then on to Africa where we landed at Gazala, between Derna and Tobruk. Part of the first Staffel was already there.

When we arrived, our opponents were Hurricanes which had had it easy with the unescorted Stukas. We had significant advantages over the Hurricanes. Homuth, Marseille, Schröer, and Stahlschmidt were very good pilots. Marseille in particular was magnificent, looked after by the gods, though he was a little rascal and an impertinent lad. Consequently, when other *Geschwader* had to release some pilots to our unit, he was assigned to our unit at Döberitz even though he was a very good pilot and already had several *Abschüsse*. When he arrived, his hair was too long, and his jacket was shabby. His father was a general in the Army, but at that time Marseille was not yet a *Leutnant*. It was said that he kept the company of film actresses and he was not considered suitable to be an officer. His *Staffelkapitän* was Homuth who was serious and intellectual, the opposite of Marseille, and Homuth did not like him. I kept a tight rein on Marseille and he trusted me.

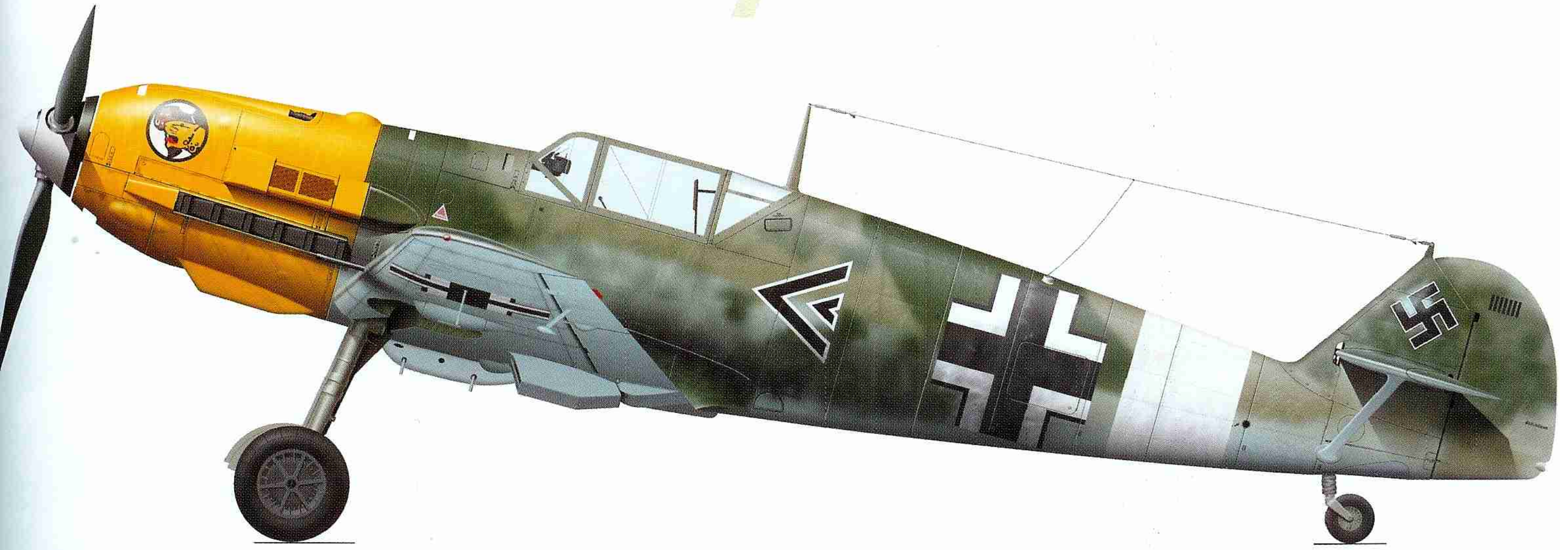
Every *Geschwader* has its own personality. We had our own intentions and we protected our own. In Africa, Kesselring wanted us to attack the airfields at Alamein with the Stukas, but I told him that this would result only in our annihilation. One had to protest vehemently to achieve the objective and in JG 27 there was a dedicated loyalty which is the reason members of the *Geschwader* continue to this day to come to the reunions.

I became *Kommodore* of JG 27 on 10 June 1942. Homuth took my place as *Kommandeur* of I. *Gruppe* and Marseille took over Homuth's *Staffel*. From Africa I went to Athens in Greece for the air defence of the Aegean. One *Gruppe* was at Athens, one on Crete, and another in France. In March 1943 I returned to Berlin and Rödel took command of the *Geschwader*. When I left, my tally was relatively poor compared to those of the aces which our unit had generated, but I considered that I had carried out my duties the best way I could.



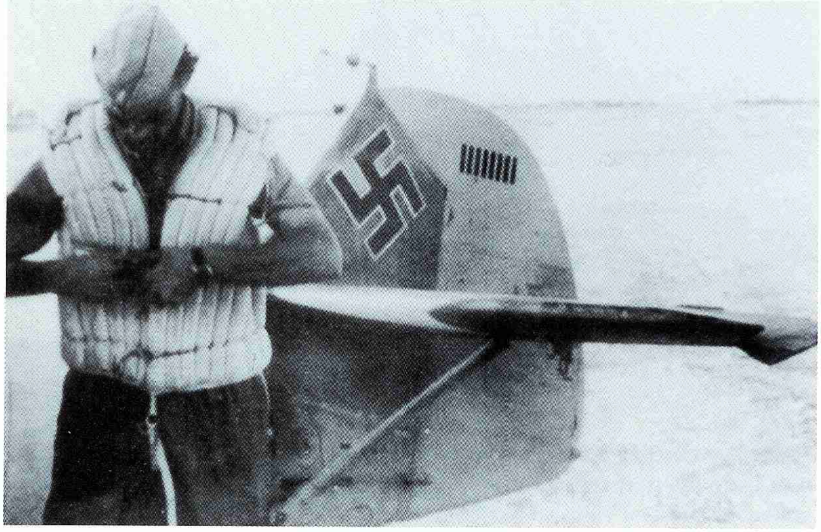
ABOVE: Hptm. Eduard Neumann, Gruppenkommandeur of I./JG 27, in April 1941, almost immediately before his transfer flight from Sicily to Tripoli.

RIGHT: The Gruppenstab of I./JG 27 re-equipped with the Bf 109 F-4 Trop in November 1941. This photograph shows Neumann returning from one of his first missions in the new type.

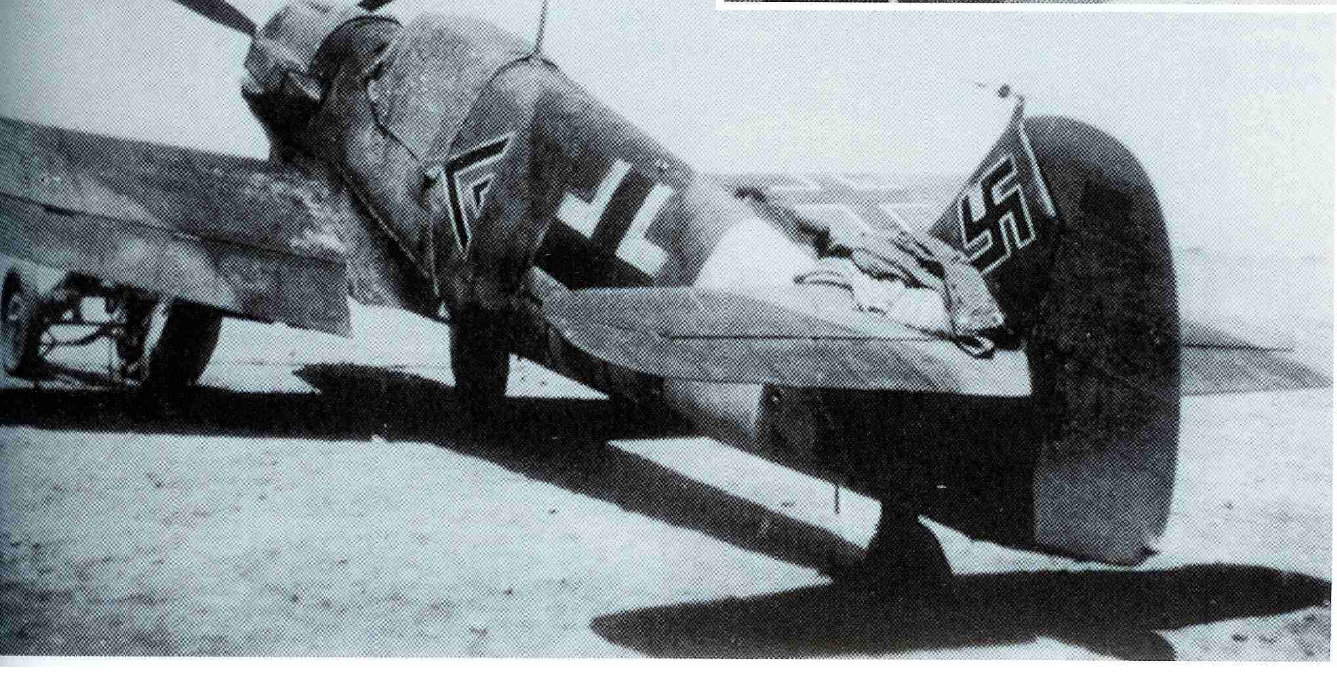


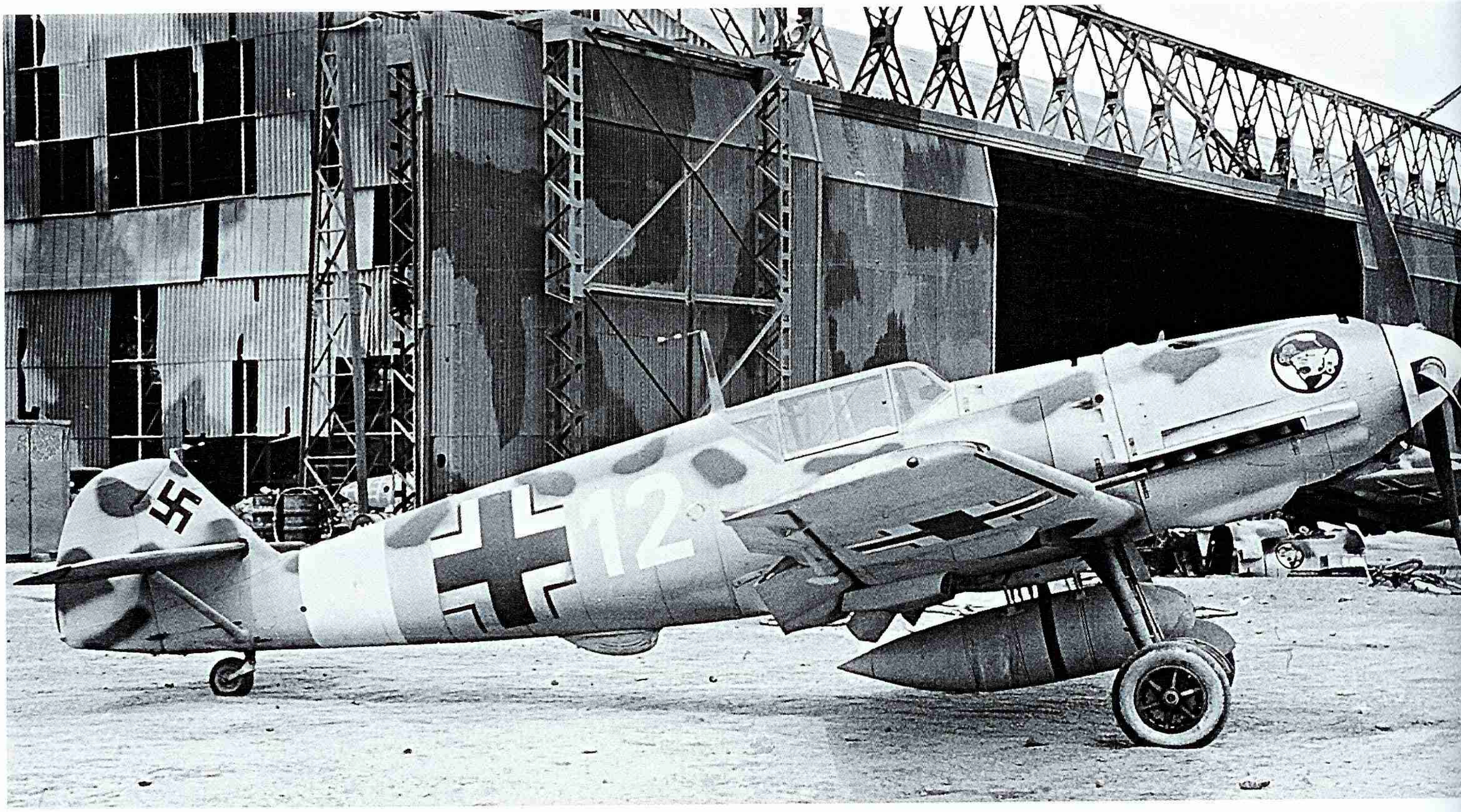
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop flown by Hptm. Eduard Neumann, Kommandeur of I./JG 27, Gazala, late June 1941

Before moving to North Africa, this aircraft was resprayed in an 02/71/65 scheme which has concealed the aircraft stencilling and the octane triangle which would normally have appeared on the fuselage. The Kommandeur's double chevron has been applied and seven victory bars decorate the rudder. It is believed this victory tally appeared only on the port side.

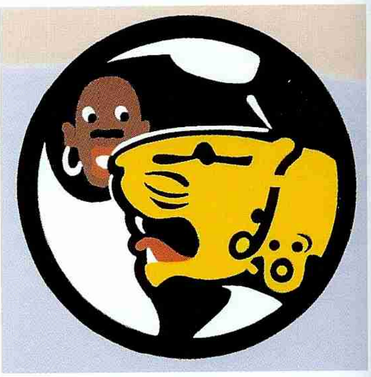


BELOW: Neumann's machine photographed at Gazala in the Summer of 941, shortly after he claimed a Hurricane as his seventh victory near ort Capuzzo on 15 June 1941. As this machine was later damaged and he tail unit completely severed, it is not known whether this later view *RIGHT)* of Neumann posing by his rudder shows another machine or erhaps the same one with a new tail unit. In any event, the rudder is ow yellow and is marked with eight victory bars, his latest being a urricane destroyed near Halfaya Pass on the morning of 8 July 1941.





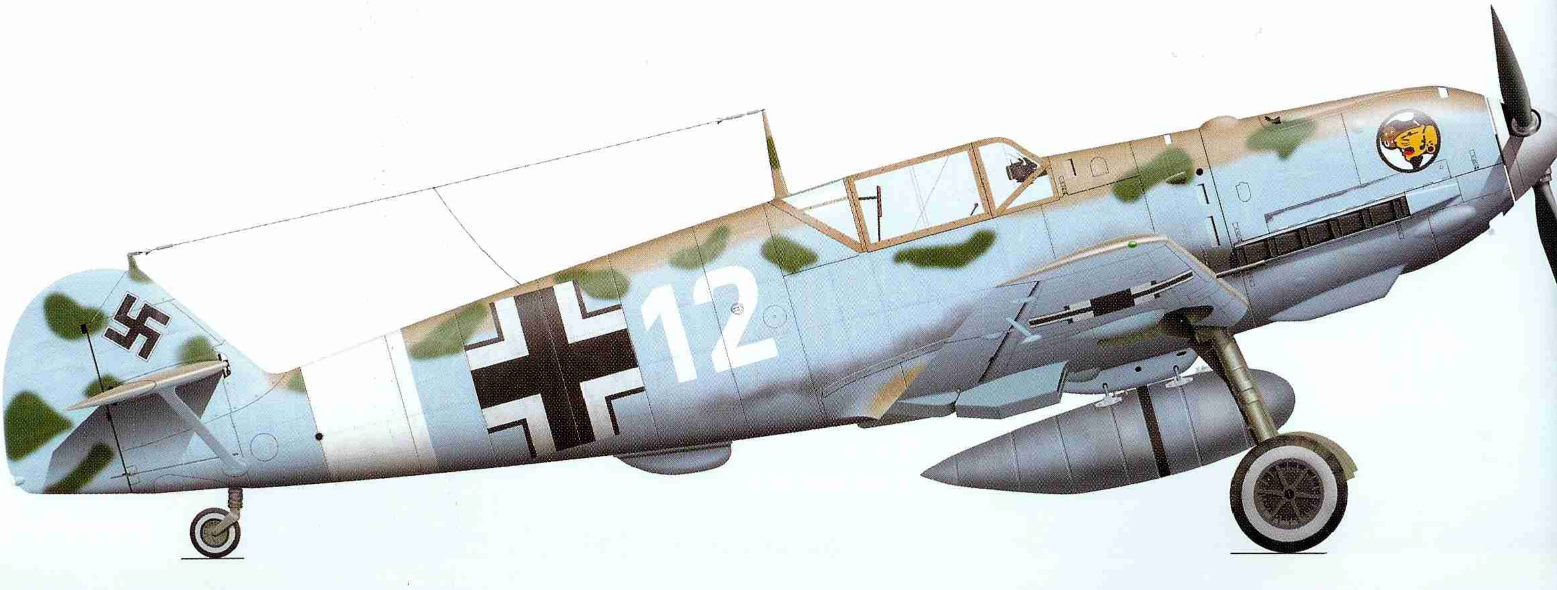
ABOVE: Shown on Sicily in May 1941, this Bf 109 E-7 Trop, 'White 12' of 1./JG 27, was photographed before transferring to North Africa and shows the desert paint scheme which is believed to have been applied using Italian colours. This aircraft has been fitted with a Lw-Zielfluganlage Peil G IV direction-finder, as is evident from the fairing below the fuselage. Full details concerning the significance of the white walls to the tyres are still lacking but are believed to show that the tailwheel had special properties to aid the discharge of static electricity, while the white-walled main-wheel tyres were specially strengthened for use where airfields consisted of hard, rough ground.

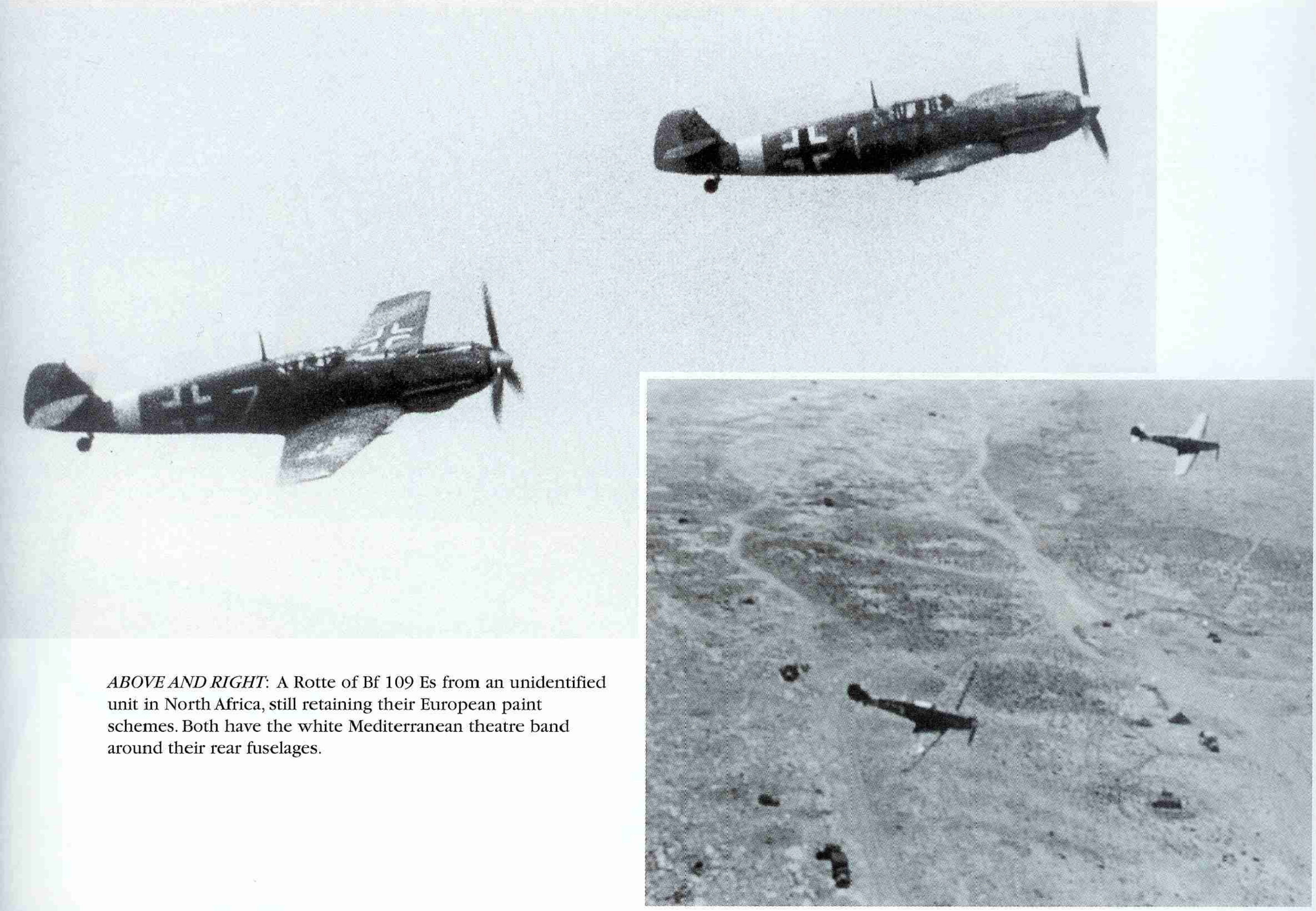


I./JG 27 emblem

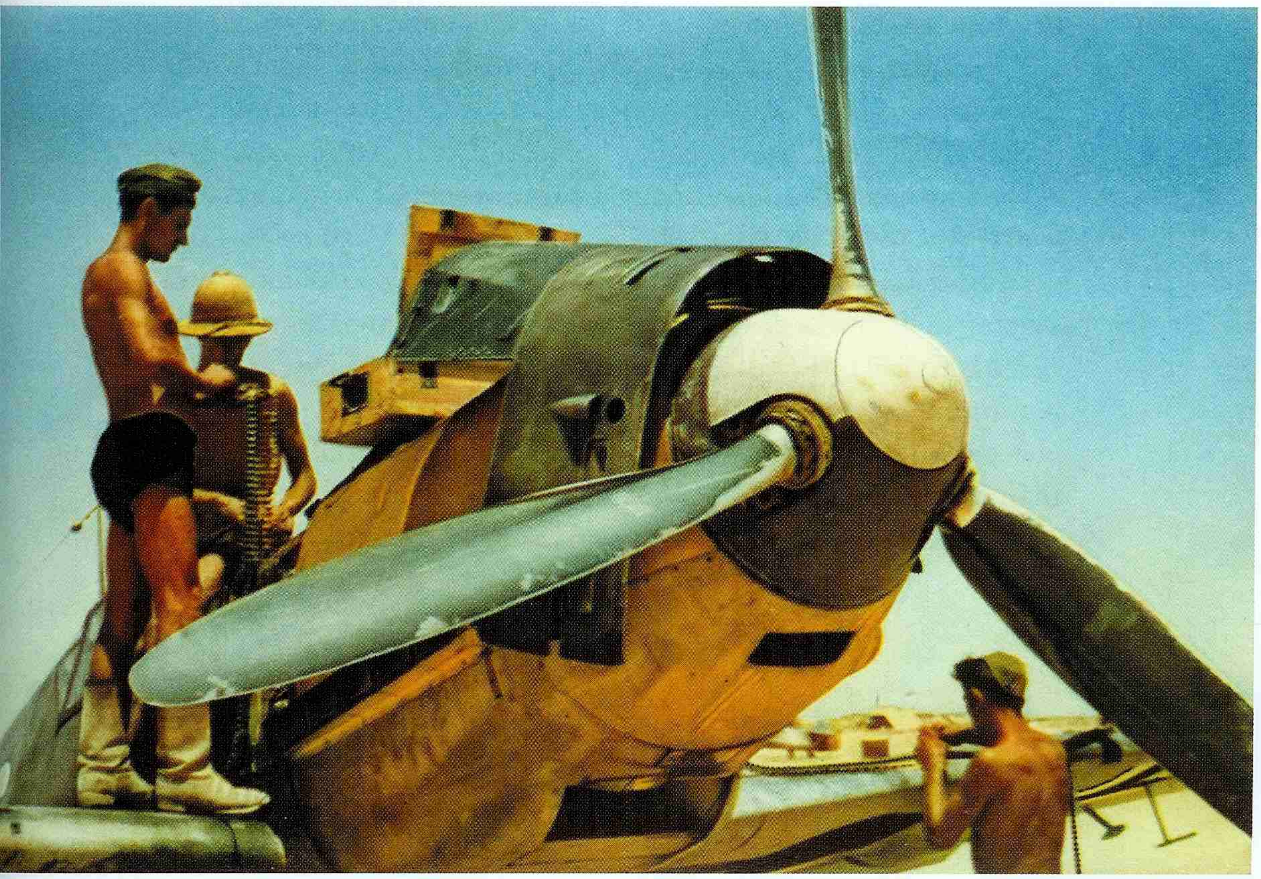
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop 'White 12' of 1./JG 27, Sicily, May 1941

It is believed that this aircraft was re-camouflaged in Sicily and that for early desert schemes such as this, which first appeared as early as May 1941, stocks of Italian paints were used. Note the weathered, dirty white outline to the fuselage cross compared to the new white of the fuselage band and code number, indicating that the aircraft had seen some service before the desert camouflage and band were applied.

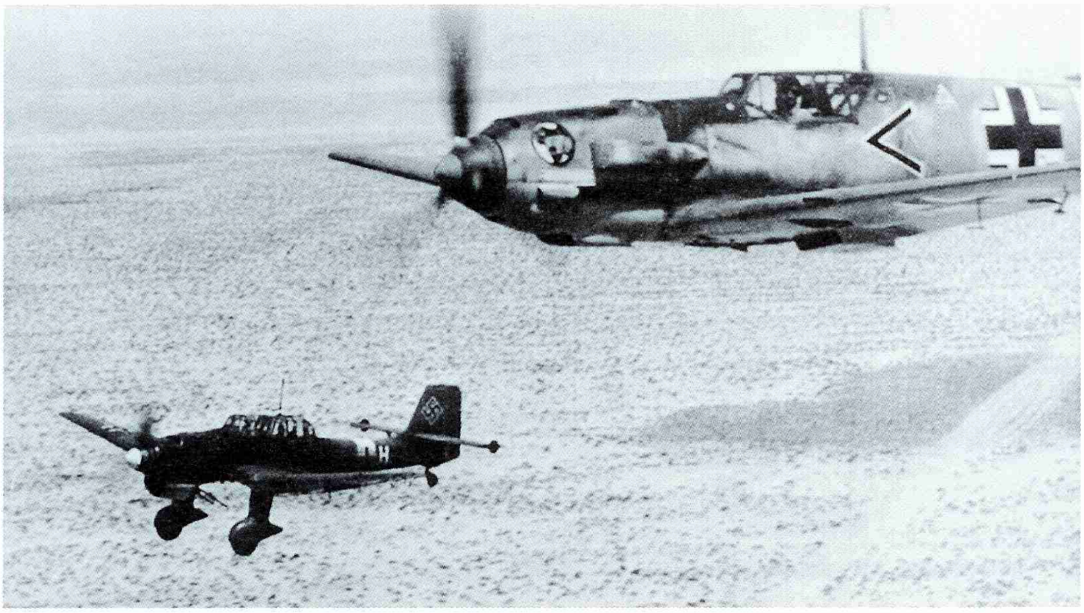




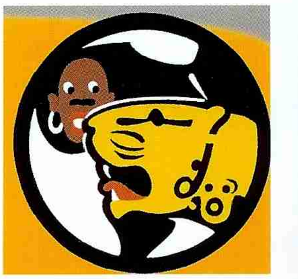
ABOVE AND RIGHT: A Rotte of Bf 109 Es from an unidentified unit in North Africa, still retaining their European paint schemes. Both have the white Mediterranean theatre band around their rear fuselages.



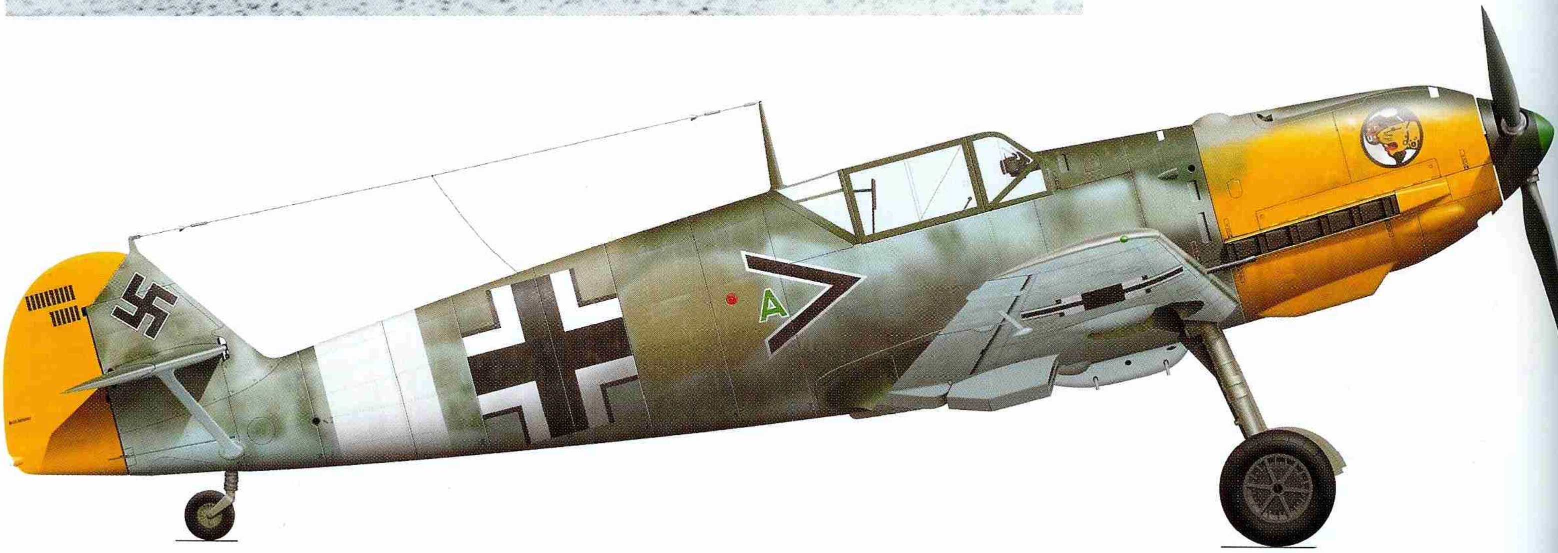
LEFT: Armourers re-loading the fuselage-mounted MG 17 machine-guns on a Bf 109 E of JG 27. Although unquestionably taken in the Western Desert, this photograph clearly shows the grey and green camouflage and conspicuous yellow tactical nose markings previously employed in Europe.



LEFT: A Bf 109 E-7 of the Stabschwarm of I./JG 27 which is believed to have been flown by the Gruppe Adjutant, Oblt. Ludwig Franziske shown while flying escort for Ju 87s of II./St.G 2.

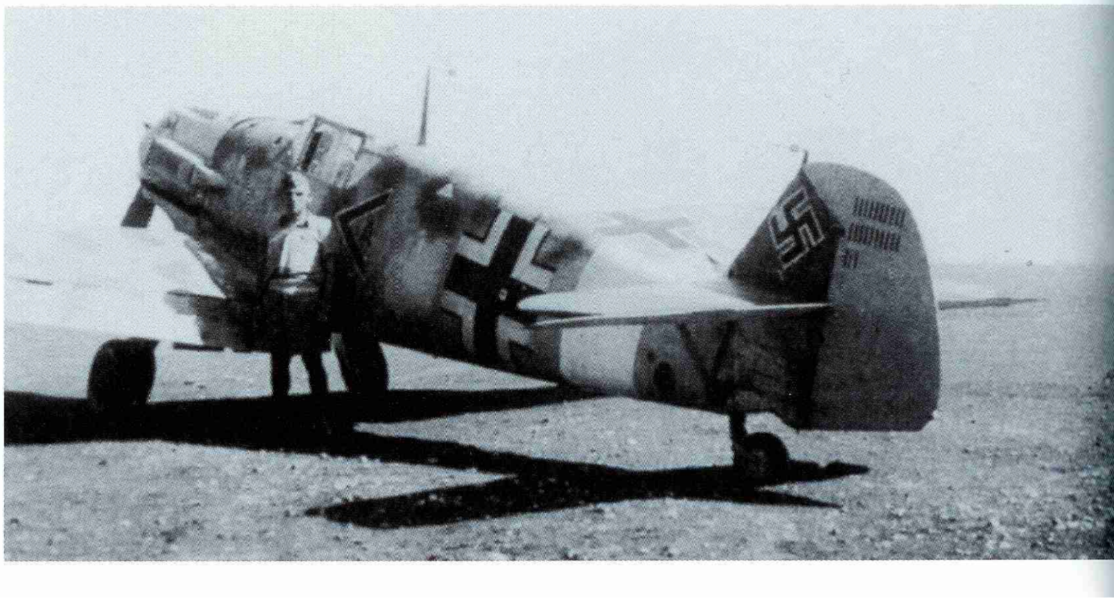


I./JG 27 emblem

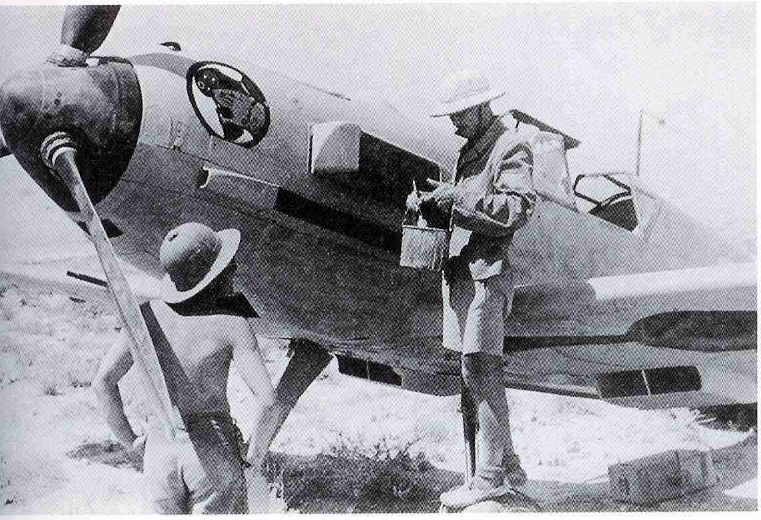


Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop flown by Oblt. Ludwig Franzisket of the Stabschwarm of I./JG 27, April 1941

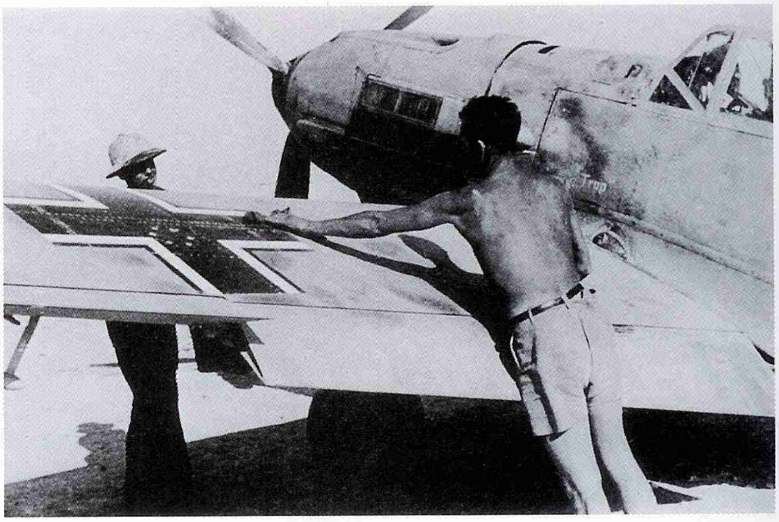
Although it was later repainted in a desert scheme more appropriate to the North African area of operations, Oblt. Franzisket's aircraft is depicted here still retaining its European scheme of 02/71 uppersurfaces over 65 undersurfaces. The rudder and engine cowling are yellow, and sixteen victory bars appear on the rudder, the last two representing Hurricanes destroyed during a mission to Tobruk on 23 April 1941. The spinner tip and small letter 'A' on the fuselage side are in the Stab colour of Green 25.



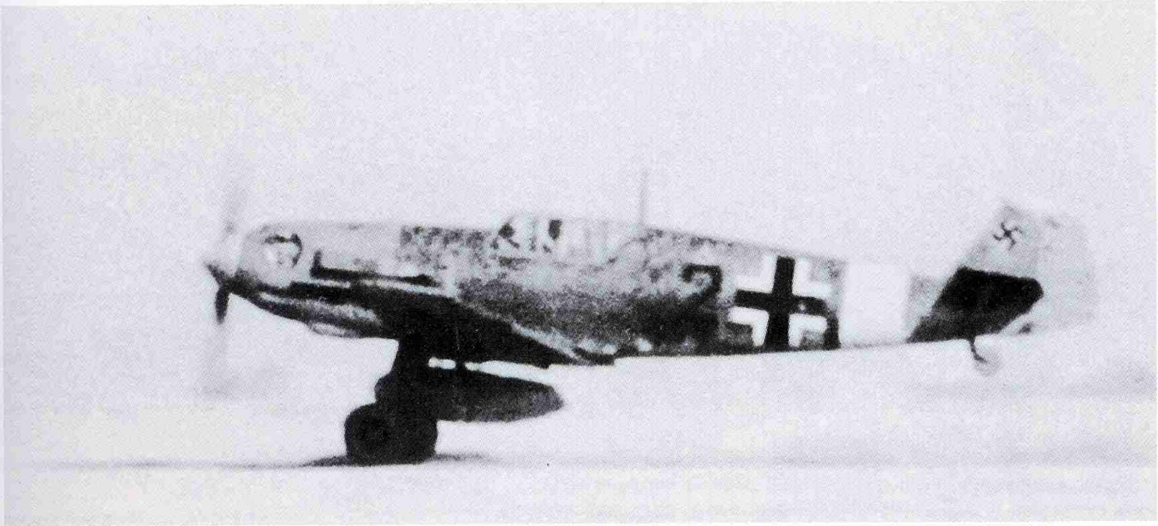
RIGHT: This aircraft was flown by Oblt. Ludwig Franzisket of Stab I./JG 27. The rudder is marked with the pilot's victory tally, the last, the 23rd, being a Hurricane shot down over Sidi Barrani on 9 September 1941. Although carrying Stab markings similar to picture above this machine is finished in a desert camouflage scheme.



ABOVE: Desert sand was highly abrasive and aircraft paintwork quickly weathered, as may be seen on the spinner and lower engine cowling of this Bf 109 E from I./JG 27 which was photographed while being repainted.



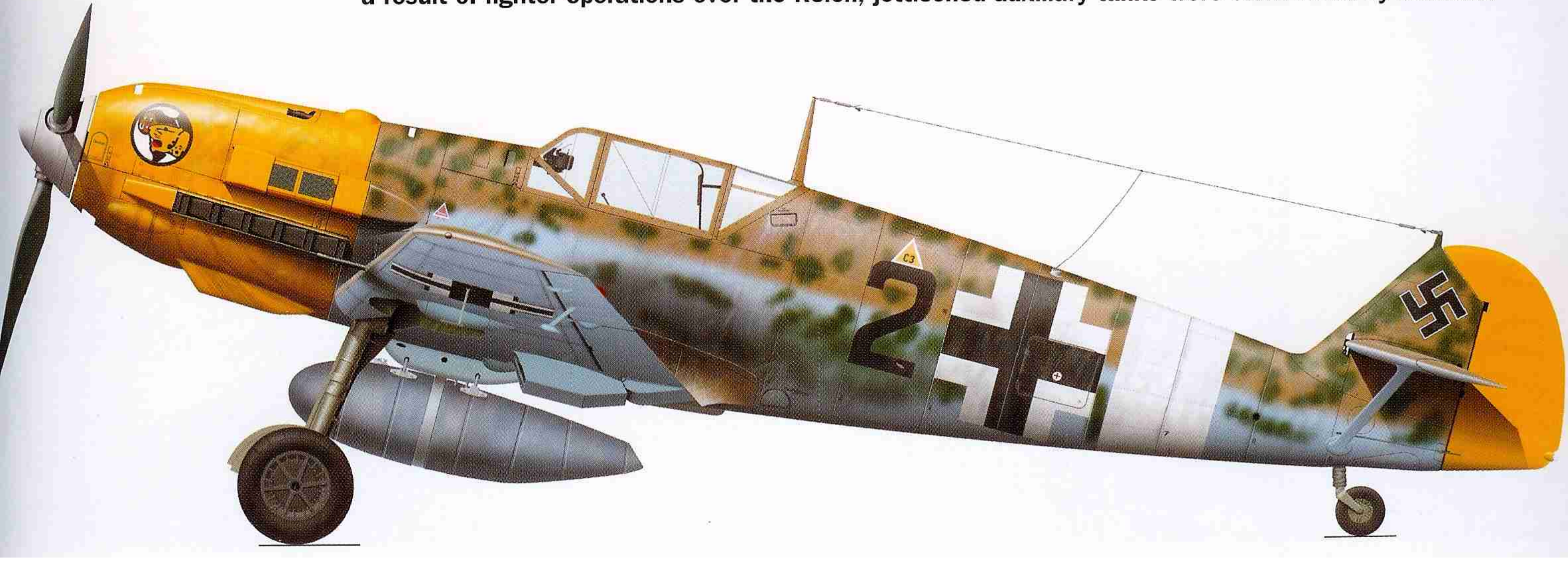
ABOVE: Personalised aircraft were rather rare in the Western Desert. This Bf 109 E-7, with uppersurfaces camouflaged in an overall sand colour, has the legend "Trup" painted on the fuselage, just above the forward wing root.

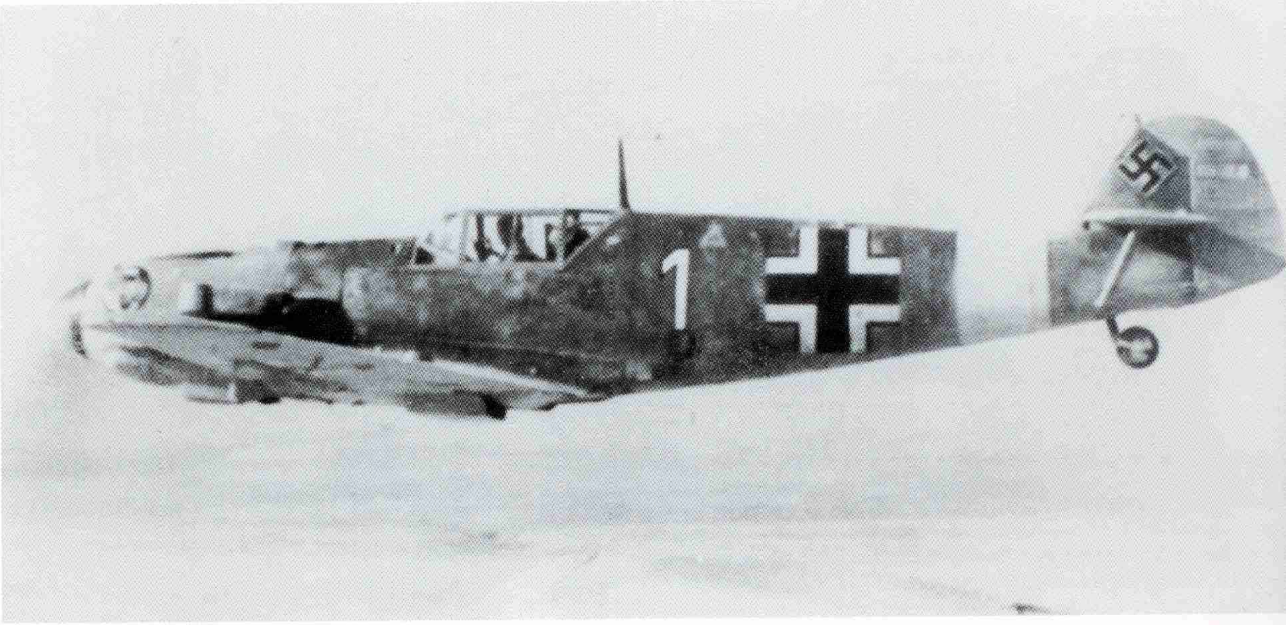


LEFT: The mottled desert camouflage showed considerable variations, perhaps indicating the work of different hands, but while most examples had rather large, regular mottles, those on this 'Black 2' of 2./JG 27 are smaller and more irregular.

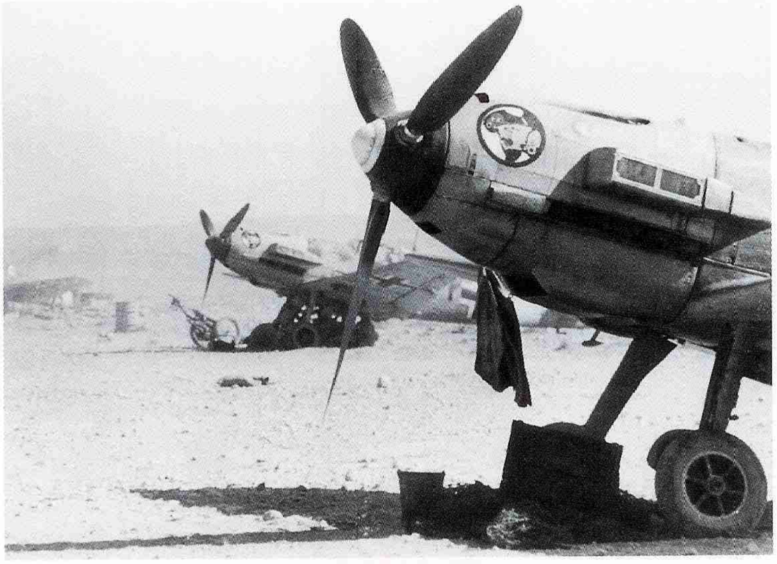
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop of 2./JG 27, Libya, 1941

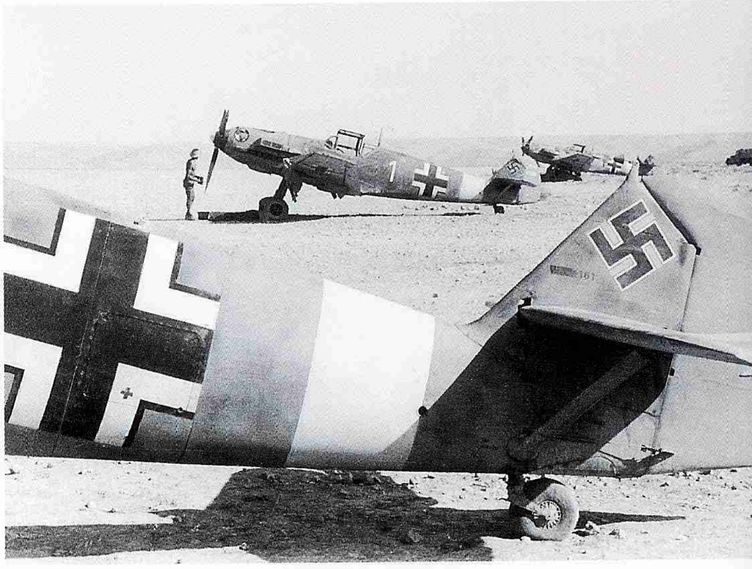
In addition to its unusual mottled scheme of 79 and 80 over Blue 80 undersurfaces, 'Black 2' also has a non-standard variation of the fuselage Balkenkreuz which, with its wider than standard white segments, more closely resembles the style normally reserved for wing undersurfaces. Note that the auxiliary fuel tanks carried by Luftwaffe single-seat and heavy fighters at this time had no stencilling, the later, familiar warning 'Keine Bombe!' only appearing to reassure the public that the object was 'Not a Bomb' when, as a result of fighter operations over the Reich, jettisoned auxiliary tanks were often found by civilians.



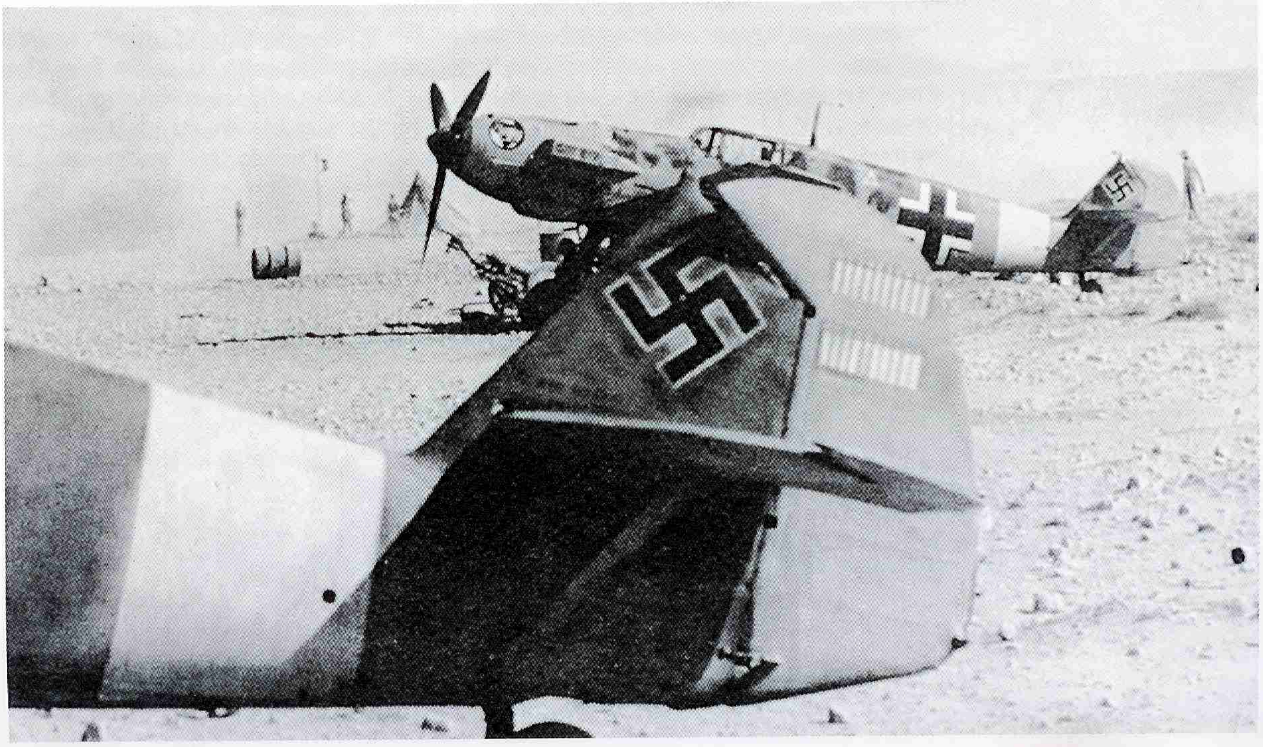


RIGHT: An air-to-air view of 'White 1', the Bf 109 E-7 Trop flown by Oblt. Wolfgang Redlich, who led 1./JG 27 from 1 October 1939 until 5 December 1941.



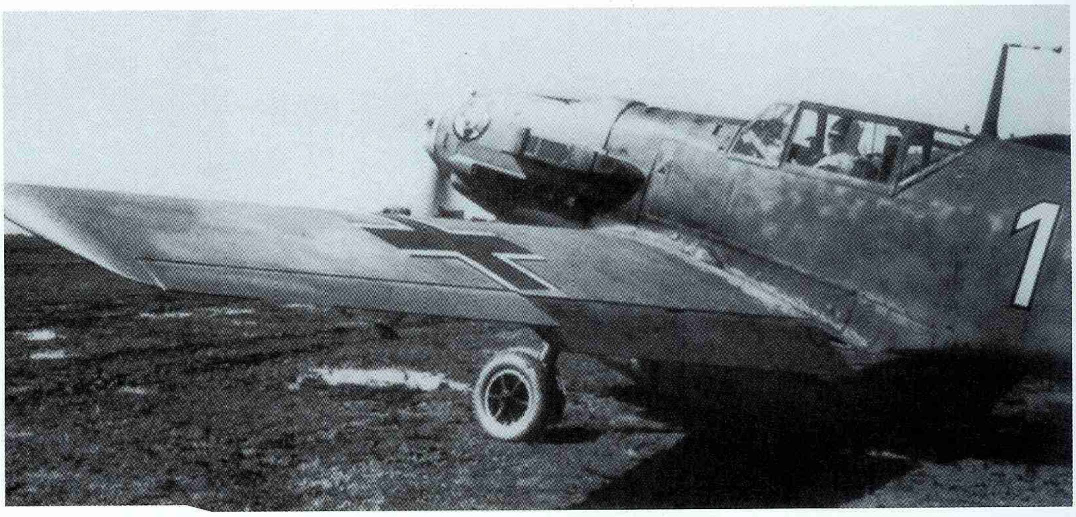


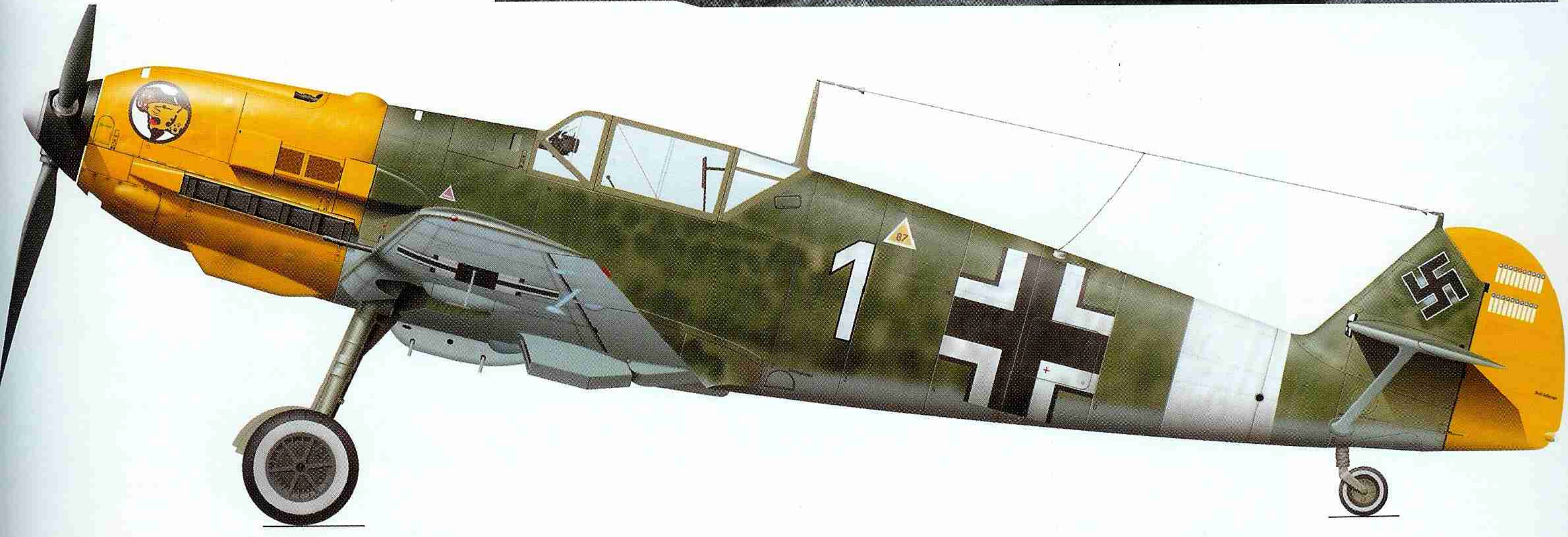
ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT: Nose details of 'White 1', shown in the foreground *(ABOVE)* and a further view *(ABOVE RIGHT)* of the same aircraft parked in the centre of this line-up.



RIGHT: In the foreground is the tail of Oblt. Redlich's aircraft shortly after 15 June 1941 when he accounted for his 20th victory, a Hurricane destroyed over Sollum.

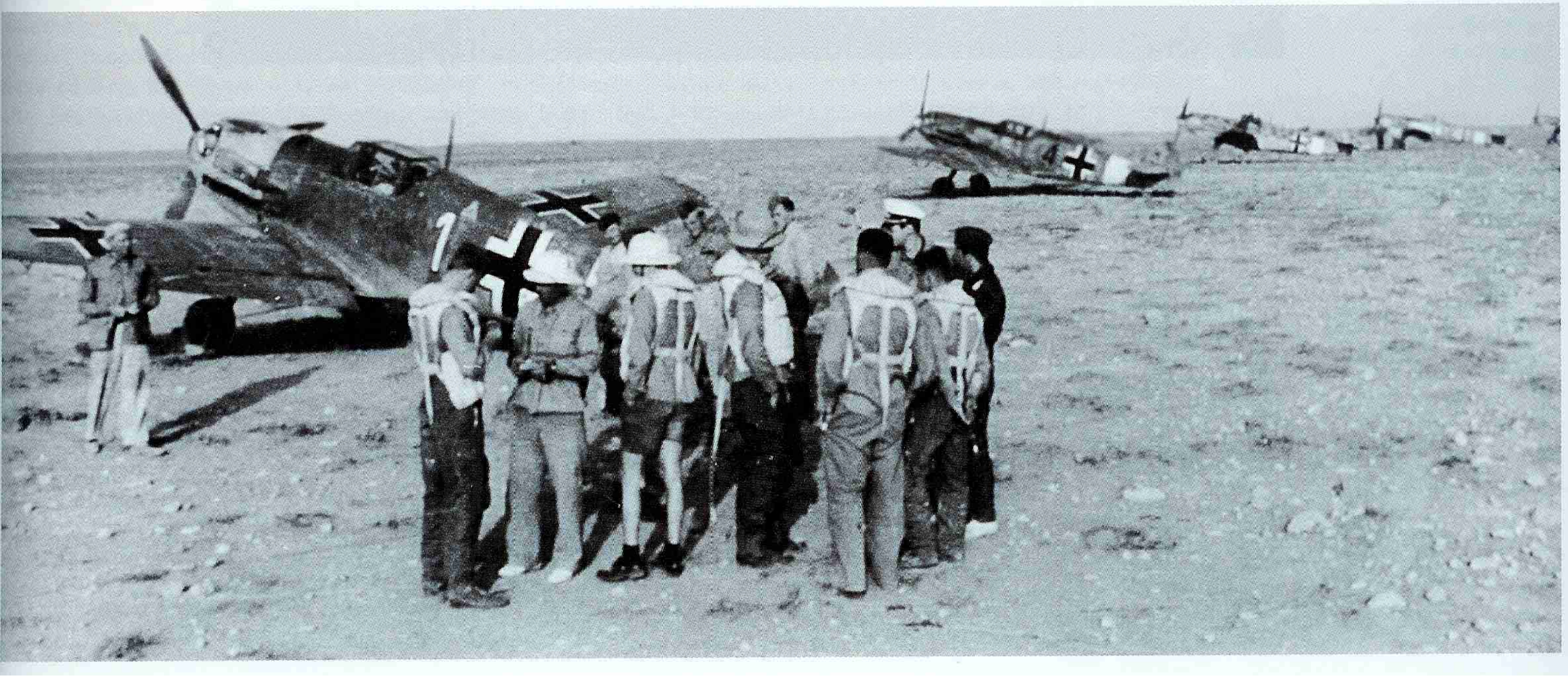
THIS PAGE: When Oblt Redlich arrived in North Africa, he already had 10 victories and claimed his first two in the new theatre on 19 April when he shot down two Hurricanes near Tobruk. Redlich claimed a total of 26 victories in North Africa, bringing his total to 36, after which he was transferred to a staff position in Germany.

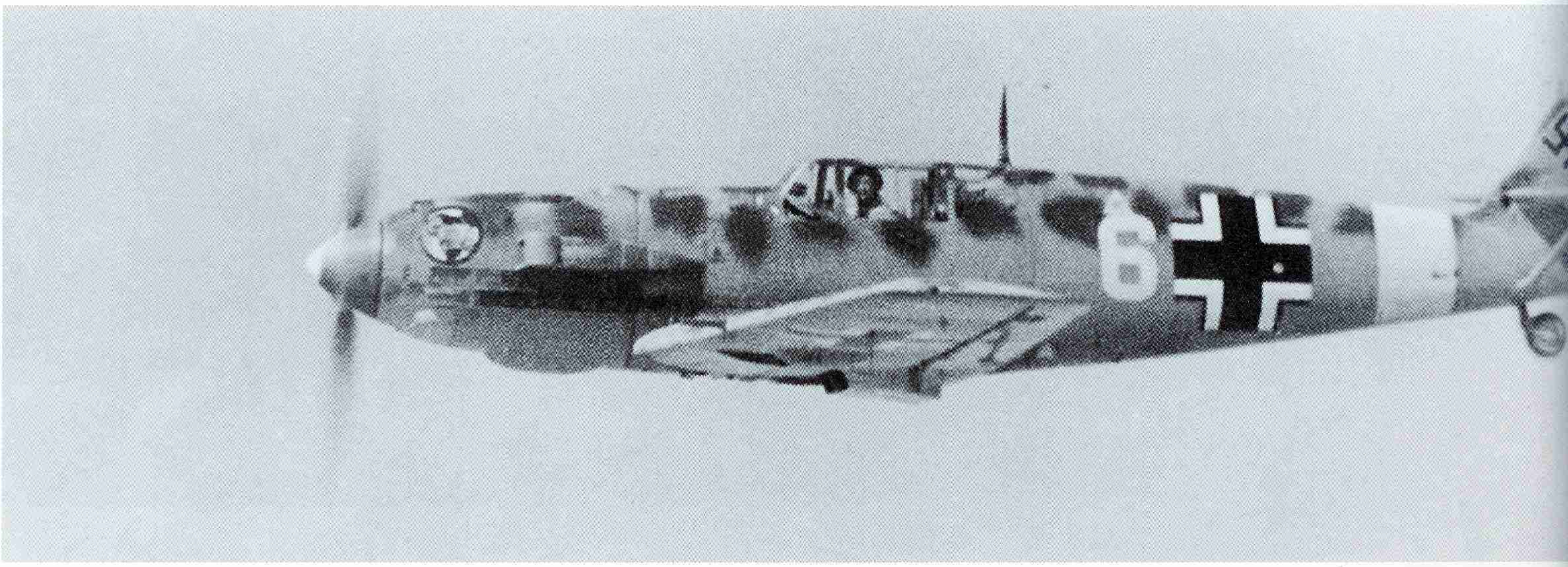




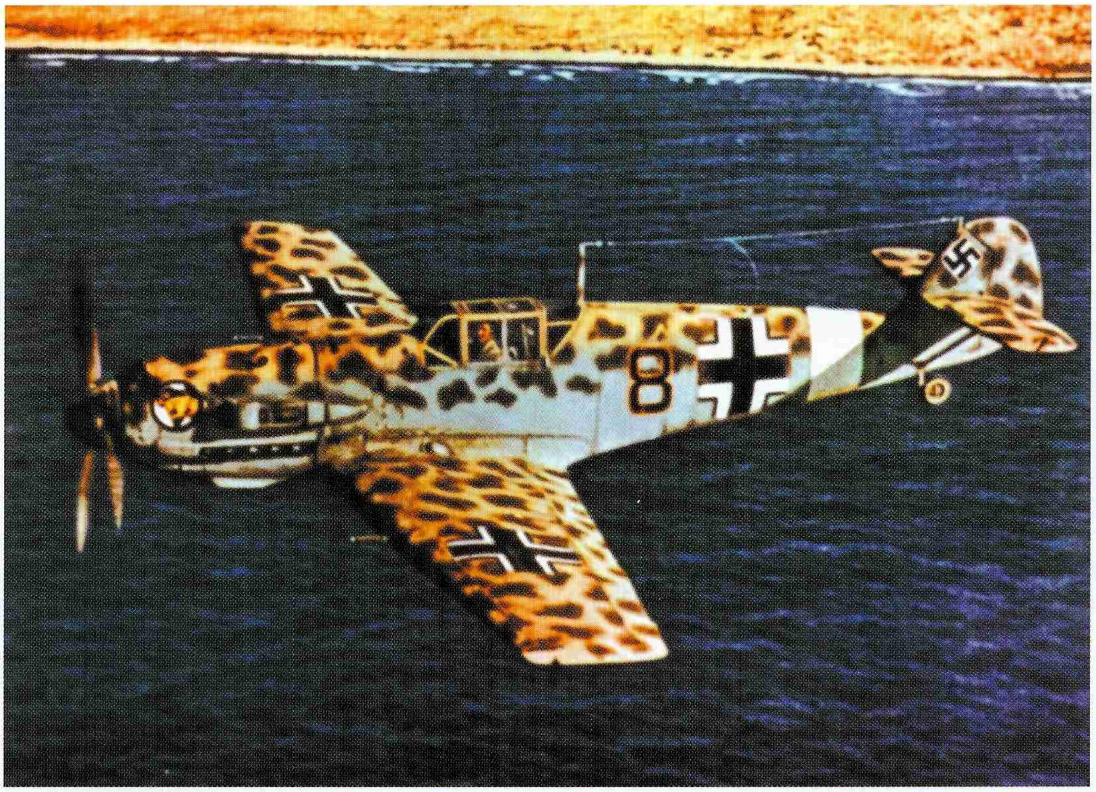
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop 'White 1' flown by Oblt. Wolfgang Redlich, Staffelkapitän of 1./JG 27, mid-June 1941

This aircraft retained its European camouflage for some time after being flown to Africa and appears to have been finished in a particularly densely mottled uppersuface scheme of 02 and 71 with a splinter pattern in these colours over the wing and tail uppersurfaces. In addition, the aircraft has a yellow engine cowling and rudder and a white fuselage band, all of which must have rendered this machine particularly conspicuous in desert conditions. Twenty white Abschussbalken appear on the rudder.



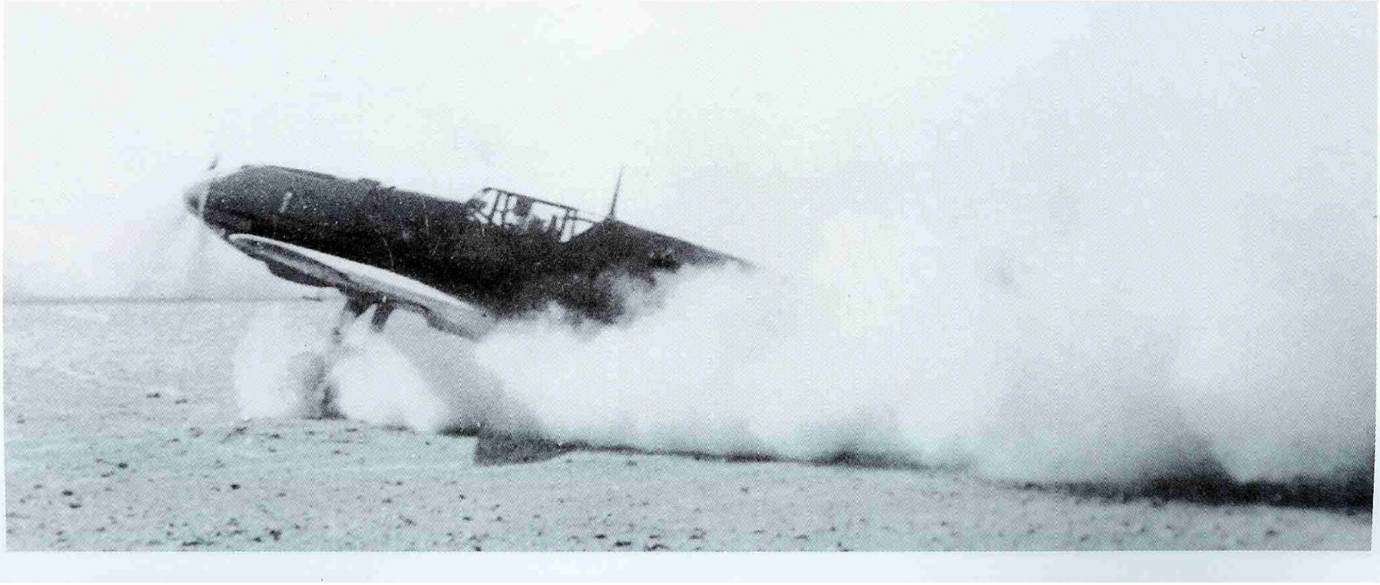


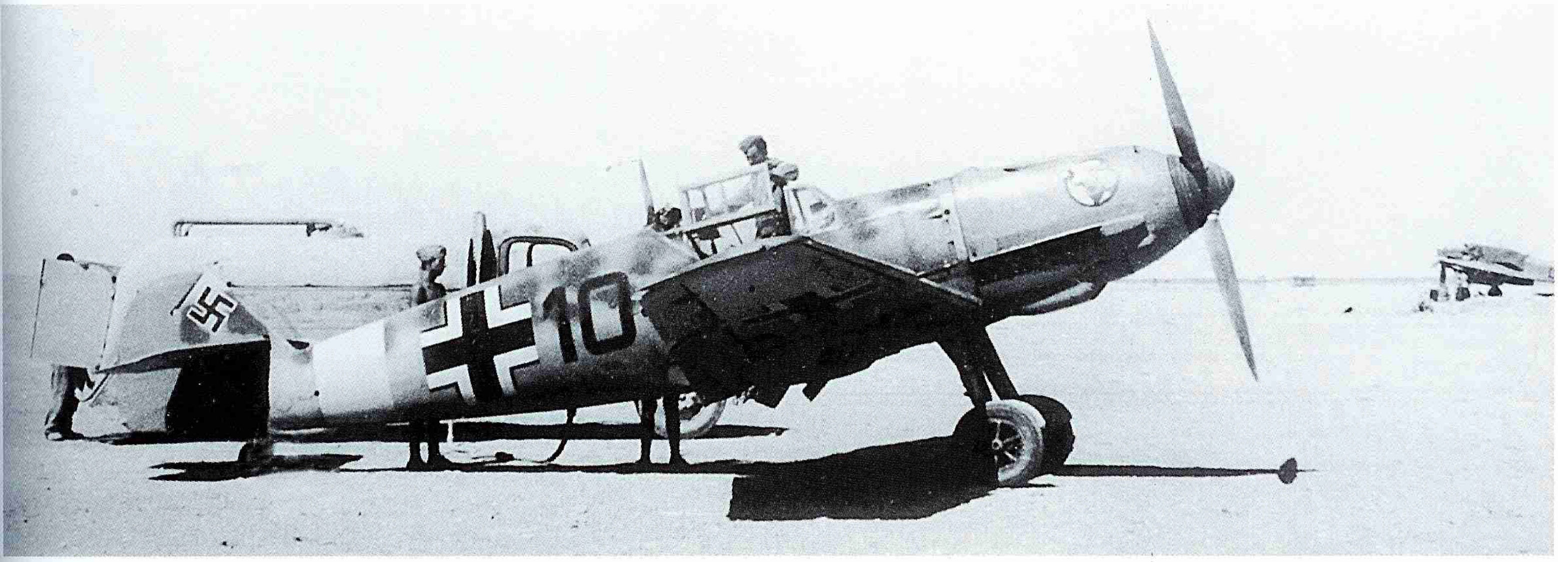
ABOVE: An air-to-air view of 'White 6', a Bf 109 E-7 Trop of 1./JG 27.

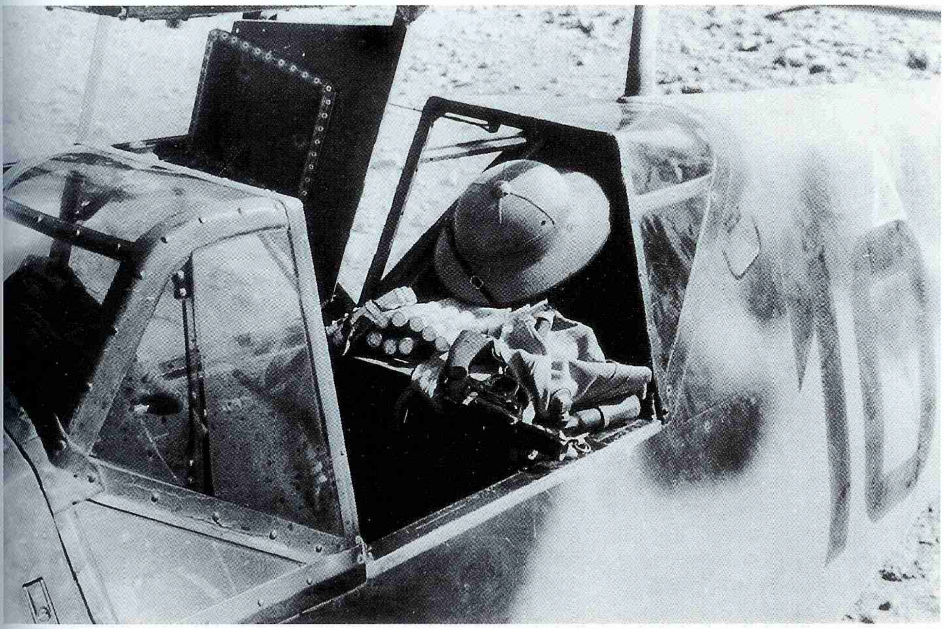


LEFT: 'Black 8' outlined in red, of 2./JG 27 flying close to the coastline of North Africa. This view shows particularly clearly the camouflage pattern on the uppersurface of the wings. Three red victory bars are carried on the rudder.

BELOW: A Bf 109 E-7 Trop of 2./JG 27 scrambles from Gazala, Summer 1941.





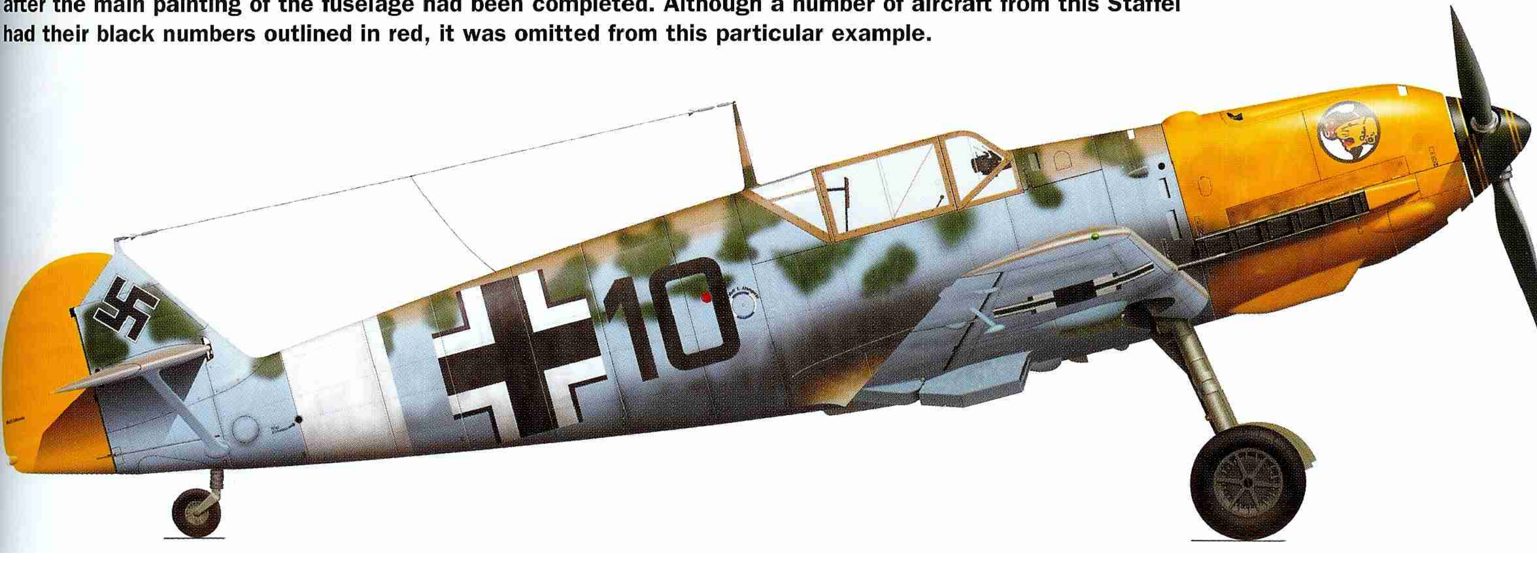


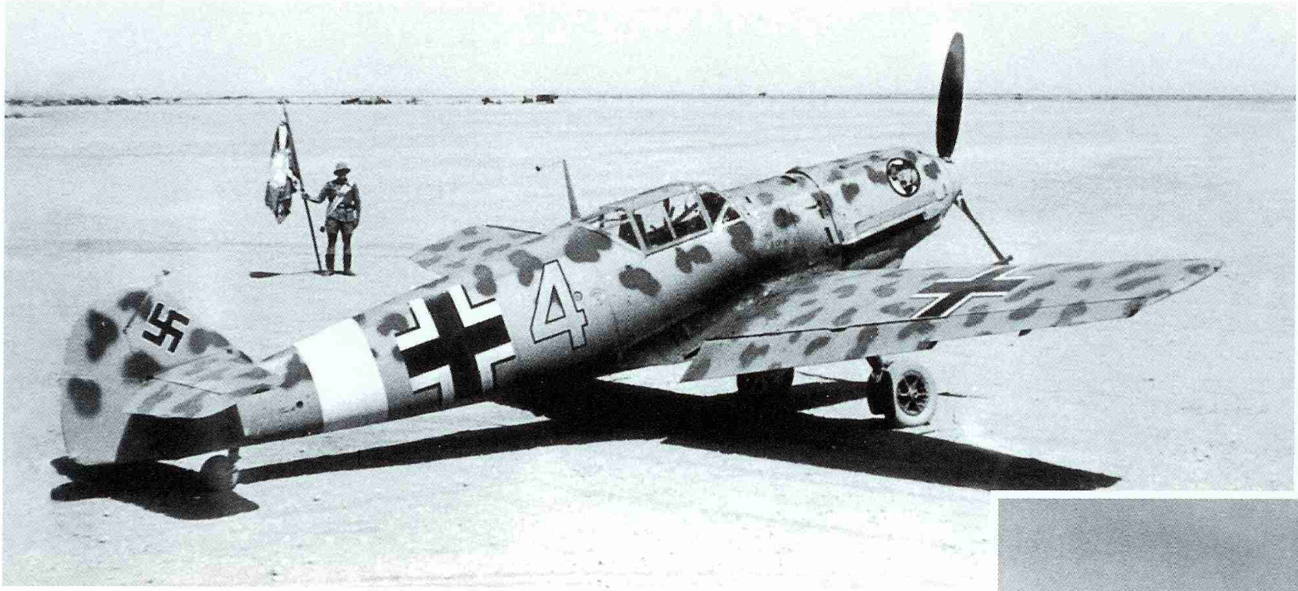
ABOVE: Members of the Stabskompanie (ground personnel) refuelling a desert camouflaged Bf 109 E-7 Trop, 'Black 10', of 2./JG 27. Obtaining sufficient quantities of fuel was a constant problem for the German forces in North Africa as many ships transporting fuel and other supplies were sunk by submarines and aircraft operating from Malta. Although obsolete, Royal Navy Albacore and Swordfish torpedo-carrying aircraft operating at night from land bases on the island were remarkably effective. The British obtained details of sailing dates, etc, from ULTRA.

LEFT: Seldom remarked upon is the fact that the right-hinged canopy of the Bf 109 was almost unique and is found elsewhere only on a few later Italian fighters. Quite possibly this 'Black 10' is the same aircraft as shown above. The items of equipment, including signal cartridges, life jacket and sun helmet, stored behind the pilot's head and back armour, suggest a transfer flight.

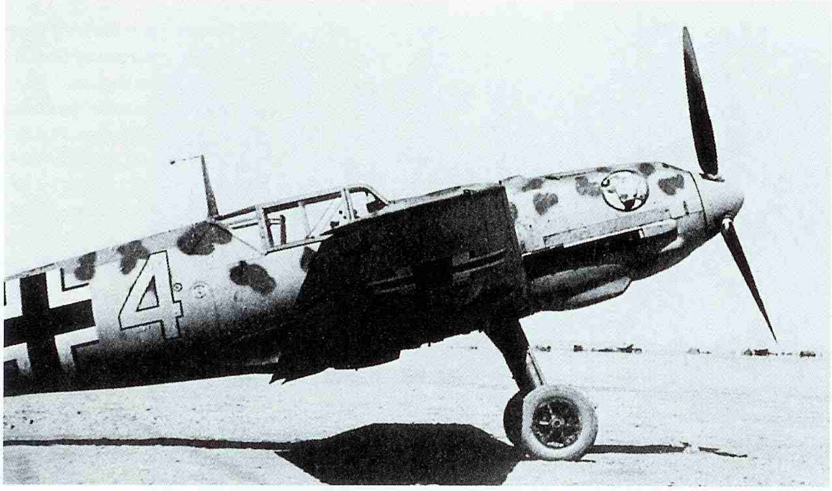
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop of 2./JG 27, Libya, mid-1941

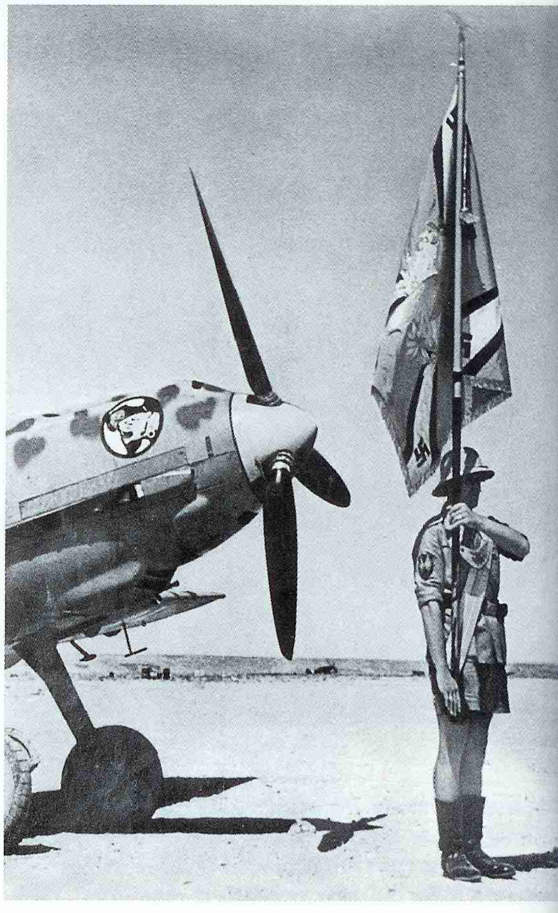
Relatively few Bf 109 Es operating in North Africa were repainted in a full desert scheme and it is believed that on most that were, Italian camouflage colours were used, as on this machine. Note that the canopy was removed from the airframe during repainting, meticulously masked off, sprayed sand colour, and replaced after the main painting of the fuselage had been completed. Although a number of aircraft from this Staffel had their black numbers outlined in red, it was omitted from this particular example.





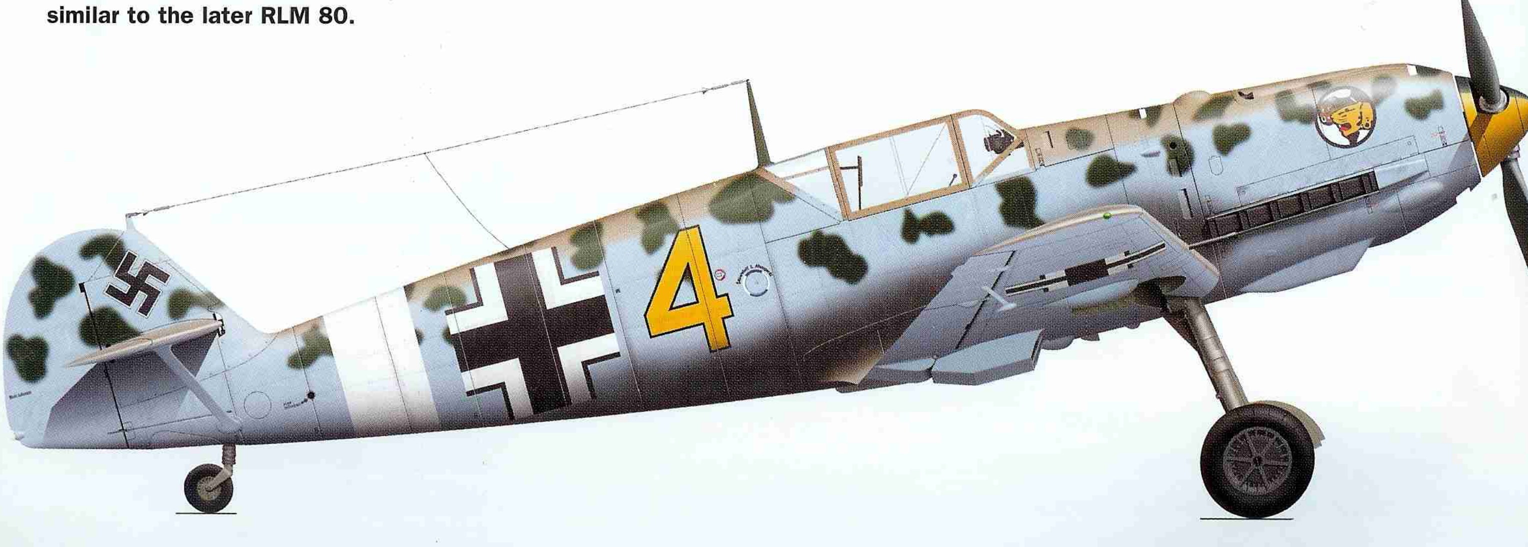
THIS PAGE: Bf 109 E-7 Trop, 'Yellow 4' of 3./JG 27 in the late Summer 1941. Later, following the Allied advance into Cyrenaica which bega on 9 December 1941, the remains of this aircraft, without wings or engine, were discovered on an abandoned airfield by British troops.

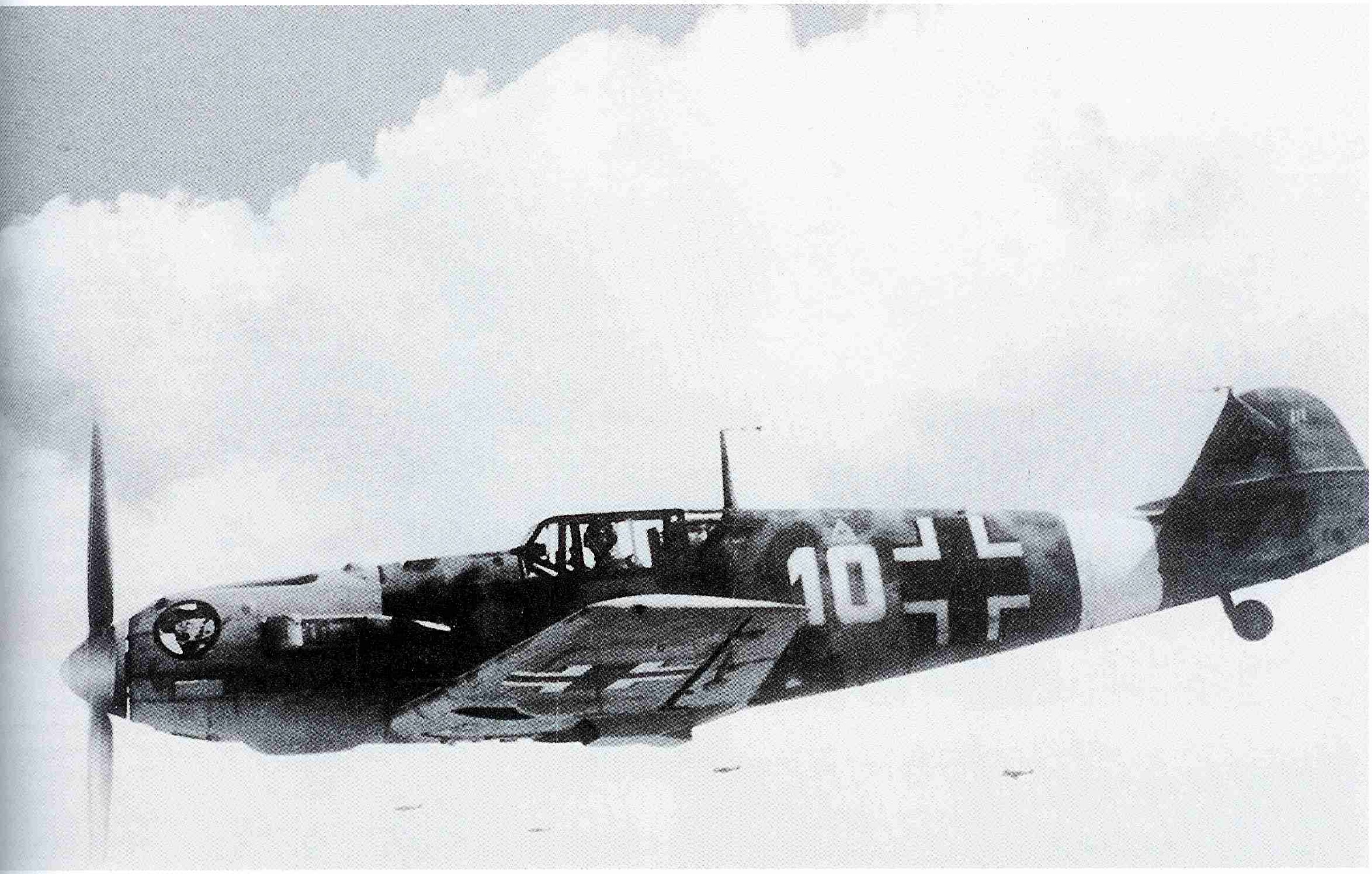




Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop of 3./JG 27, late Summer of 1941

Although this machine had seen service in North Africa for some months, the heavy exhaust deposit on the fuselage side indicates it had accumulated a considerable number of flying hours. Nevertheless, its paint finish is still in remarkably good condition and indicates that the repainting of aircraft in Luftwaffe tropical colours was carried out to a high standard. Apart from the fuselage number and the segment on the spinner, this machine lacked any of the usual yellow recognition markings. It is believed that the main camouflage colours were Italian with the green mottles being in a particularly dark tone similar to the later RLM 80.

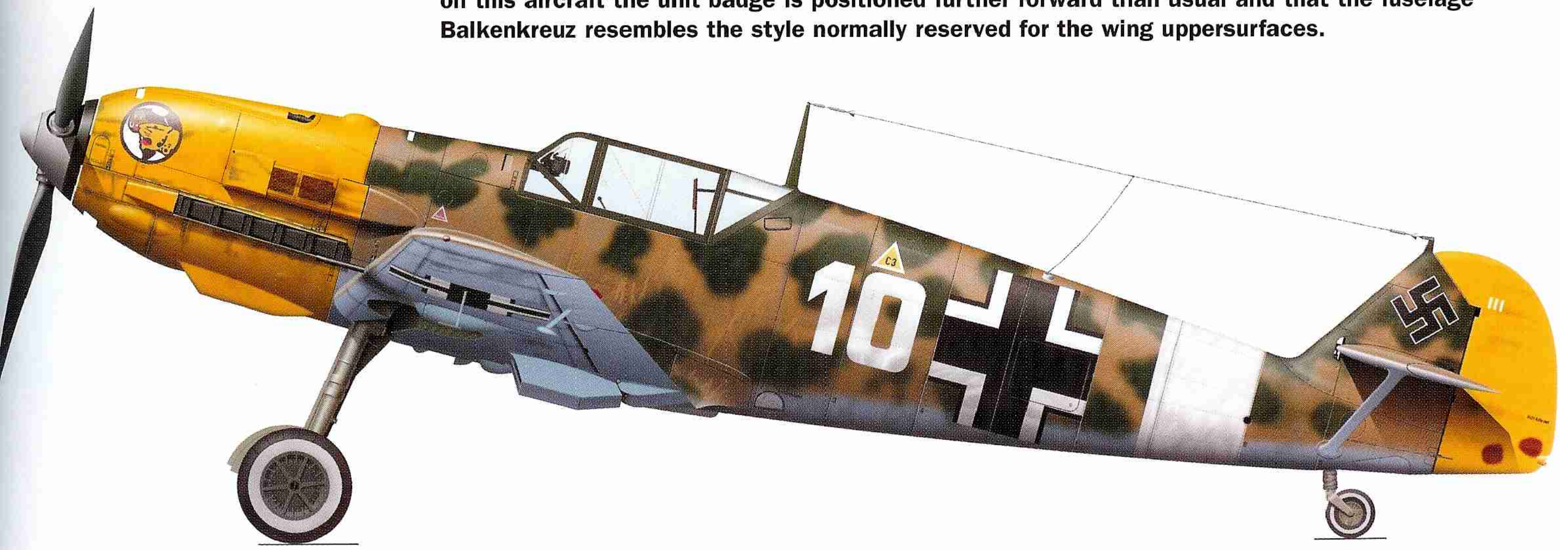


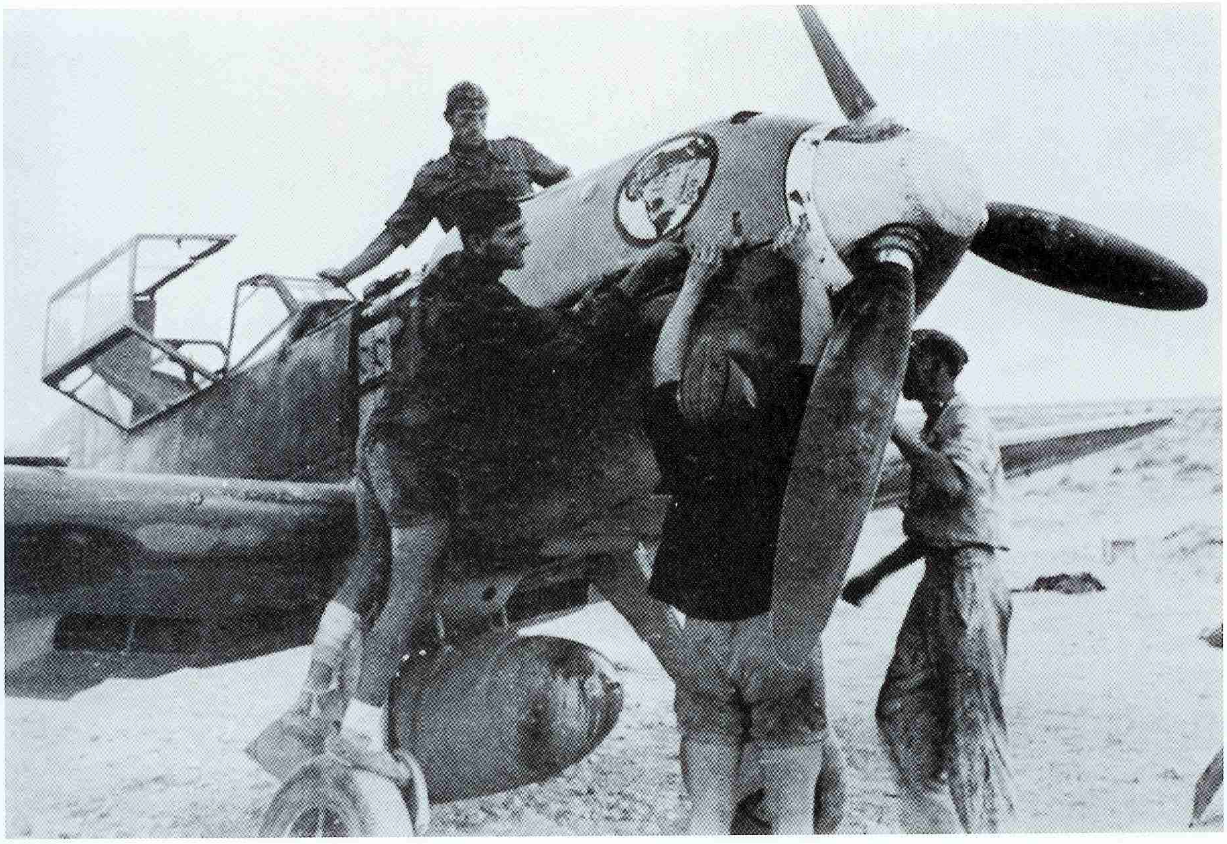


ABOVE: The Bf 109 E-7 Trop 'White 10', flown by Fw. Günther Steinhausen of 1./JG 27, seen here in flight in early August 1941. Fw. Steinhausen was one of the more successful pilots flying with 1. Staffel and claimed his first victory, a Hurricane north of Tobruk, on 9 June 1941. He claimed his second, a Buffalo, near Buq Buq on 18 June. Curiously, although Steinhausen was then credited with two Hurricanes north-west of Mersa Matruh on 2 August, bringing his tally to four, the yellow rudder of his machine is marked only with three white victory bars. Steinhausen later increased his tally to 40 but was posted missing on 6 September 1942. By that time he had received the German Cross in Gold and the Knight's Cross. He was promoted to Leutnant posthumously.

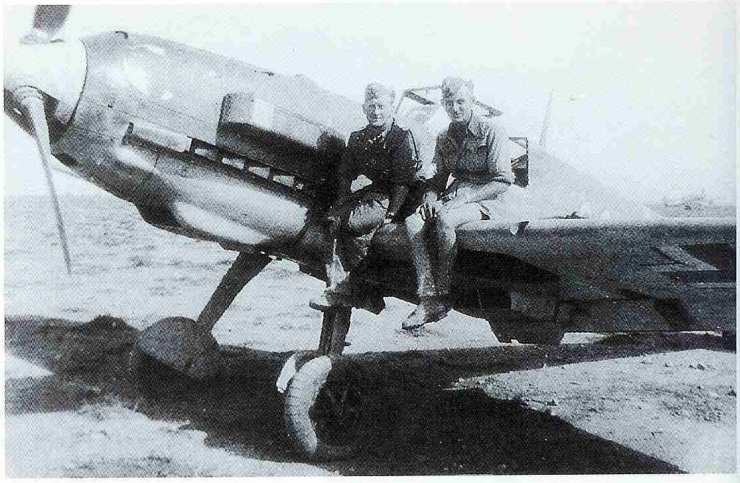
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop 'White 10 ' flown by Fw. Günther Steinhausen of 1./JG 27, early August 1941

It is believed that this aircraft was finished in the new RLM colours specially developed for the North African campaign. The original Green 71 canopy was masked off when the machine was repainted, probably at a base facility in Italy or Sicily, with 78 undersurfaces and low-demarcation 79 uppersurfaces, over which Olive Green 80 mottles have been applied. Note that on this aircraft the unit badge is positioned further forward than usual and that the fuselage Balkenkreuz resembles the style normally reserved for the wing uppersurfaces.





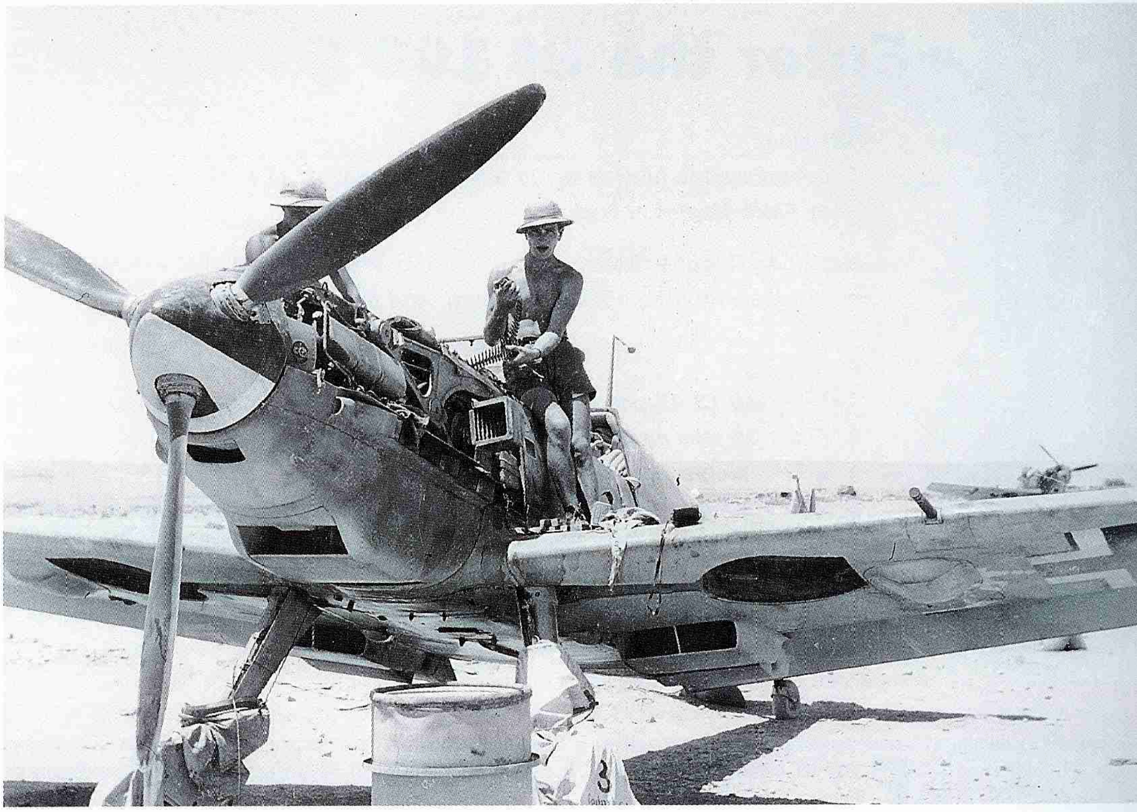
LEFT: Ground personnel fastening the engine cowling on 'White 5', the Bf 109 E-7 Trop flown by Lt. Werner Schroer of 1./JG 27. The camouflage on the fuselage of this aircraft was in the form of a continuous wavy line, which later became known as the Wellenmuster, or wave-type, camouflage.

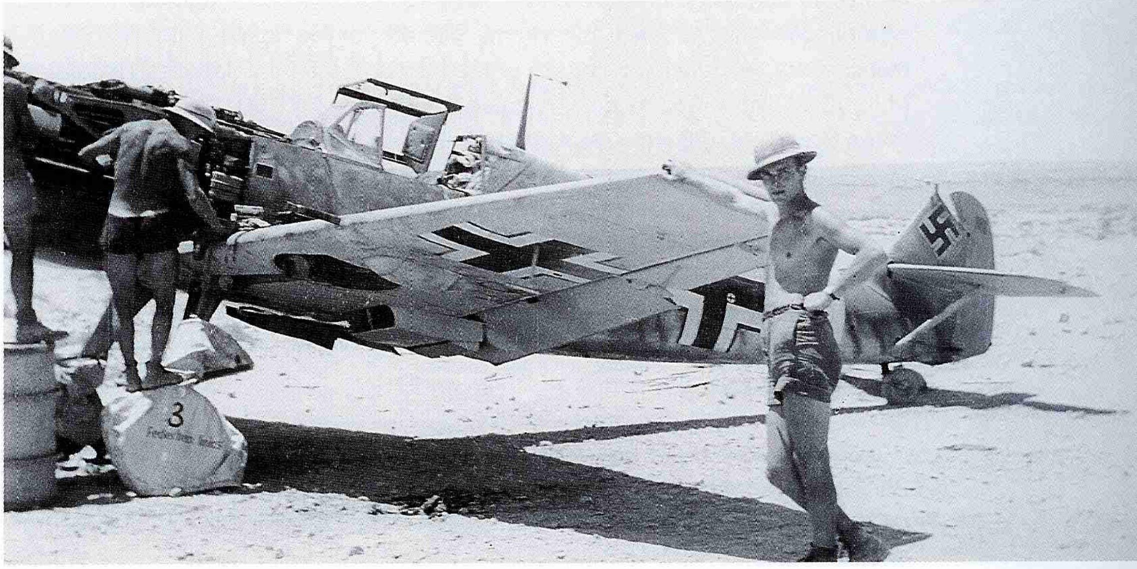


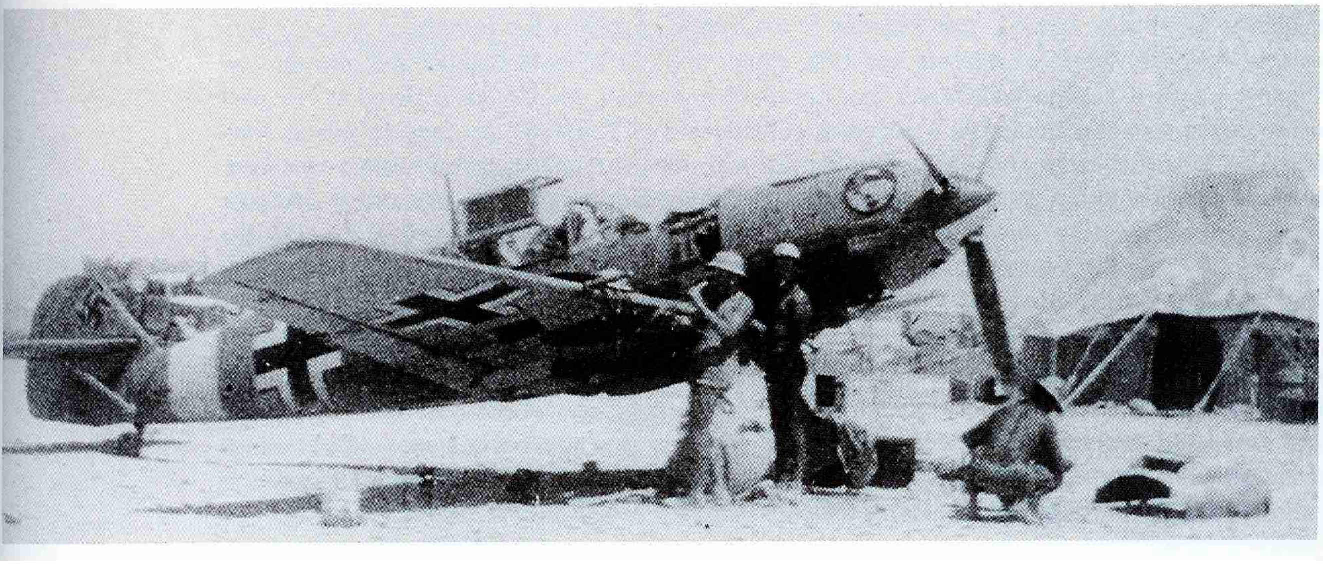
ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT: Shown left in the photograph above and seated left on the wing of a Bf 109 E is Lt. Werner Schroer of 1./JG 27 who transferred to 8./JG 27 as Staffelkapitän in July 1942 and became a successful German pilot in North Africa, second only to the remarkable Hans-Joachim Marseille, with 61 victories claimed before the end of the African campaign.

RIGHT: Ground staff working on the engine of a Bf 109 E in North Africa. Keeping the engines clean and free of sand proved to be a major problem for all air forces operating in the desert. In addition, the constant swirling of sand caused a sand-blasting effect on the leading edge of the propellors and many can be seen with the paint having been worn away.

RIGHT AND CENTRE: Ground personnel working on the DB 601N engine of a Bf 109 E-7 Trop. By May 1941, I./JG 27 had succeeded in transporting its ground elements to Africa, but the ground staff of II. Gruppe were greatly delayed due to the lack of transport space available to move them from Italy to North Africa. In early November 1941, when I. and II./JG 27 were based on the same aerodromes at Gazala and Gambut, it was relatively easy for the ground staff (Stabskompanie) of I. Gruppe to support the aircraft of II. Gruppe as the campaign was static, but when the Allies launched their 'Crusader' offensive on 18 November 1941, the situation became more difficult, particularly as the flying elements of an additional Gruppe, III./JG 27, were shortly to arrive in Africa. By the end of March 1942, i.e. five months after the flying elements of I. and II./JG 27 had become fully operational in Africa, the two Gruppen should have received about 1,200 ground personnel and about 400 vehicles on their establishment but, in fact, had received only about 110 ground personnel and none of the units' motor transport had been sent to support them. The process of transporting ground staff was much speeded up from April 1942 onwards, but the general shortage of motor transport for the Luftwaffe in Africa had far-reaching consequences, particularly once the campaign developed into one of movement. Indeed, during this phase, 4./JG 27 had to carry out the evacuation of flying elements, equipment and 50 ground staff with only two 4-ton lorries, 3 cars, a petrol bowser and a motor cycle. On 24 June 1942, during the German advance to El Alamein, Fliegerführer Afrika had only sufficient motor transport to move two fighter Gruppen forward to Sidi Barrani to support Rommel without borrowing from an already short Panzer Army. Eventually, Kesselring was obliged to point out to Rommel that inadequate serviceability, inadequate supplies, and therefore inadequate support for the Panzer Army could all be traced back to the lack of motor transport.







LEFT: Ground personnel of I./JG 27, deeply tanned by the sun, working on Lt. Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt's Bf 109.

Enter the Bf 109 F

'Mission:
Reconnaissance of area Bir el Gubi-Gabr Sciahebi (24 kilometres south south-east of Gubi) Gabr Saleh-Hagfet el Nadura.

Italian Air Reconnaissance reports in this area 800 to 1,000 vehicles, mainly tanks, moving north-west. Identification of strength and headings of enemy.

Result:
Time 12.30-12.45 pm. Observer Lt. Kuhlmann.
1. ***Fifty vehicles near Gabr Saleh.***
2. ***100 vehicles near Bir Taieb el Esem.***
3. ***250 stationary vehicles about 16 kilometres south-east of Bir el Gubi, among them tanks.***
4. ***From the above area (para.3) 100 vehicles heading south-east, 20 vehicles west north-west.***

Two sorties flown.'

Reconnaissance report by Lt. Haseloff, pilot with 2.(H)/14 flying Bf 110s
30 November 1941

Early in September 1941, a strengthening and re-organisation of the German day fighter force in North Africa began. Firstly, 7./JG 26 at last departed entirely from the area to be replaced by 4./JG 27. During its time in the Mediterranean area, the unit had created a record unique in aviation history, claiming at least 52 enemy aircraft for no losses. On the *Staffel's* return to France, Müncheberg, who had claimed 25 of the victories, was promoted to *Hauptmann* and given command of II./JG 26 which had recently re-equipped with the Fw 190. On 24 September the remaining ground crews from 7./JG 26 were returning to France by way of Salonika in a Ju 52/3m when it was attacked by three Beaufighters and two men were injured by cannon fire. The Ju 52/3m returned to Africa but both men died, these being the only fatalities suffered by the unit in the Mediterranean.

Later in the month, the three *Staffeln* of I./JG 27 also began withdrawing to Germany to re-equip one by one with the new and much improved Bf 109 F-2. On 14 September, the II. *Gruppe* of JG 27 began to arrive in North Africa. It had previously operated in Central Russia before returning to Germany also for re-equipment with the Bf 109 F-2. The *Gruppe* was commanded by *Hptm.* Wolfgang Lippert (25 victories) and the *Staffelkapitäne* were *Oblt.* Gustav Rödel (4./JG 27), *Hptm.* Ernst Düllberg (5./JG 27) and *Oblt.* Rolf Strössner (6./JG 27).

The first Bf 109 F *Staffel* to arrive in North Africa was 4./JG 27 which flew its first sortie on 26 September without event, and it was not until 3 October that the *Gruppe* fought its first combat. One Bf 109 F, the first *Friedrich* to be lost in North Africa, was shot down, but three Hurricanes were claimed, one each by *Oblt.* Rödel, *Lt.* Arthur Schacht and *Uffz.* Horst Reuter. In fact, the RAF lost a Hurricane of 33 Sqn. and two Tomahawks of 112 Sqn. Around this time, 1./JG 27 which had just finished re-equipping with the Bf 109 F-2, also returned to the theatre. A further two Hurricanes from 33 Sqn. were shot down by *Oblt.* Ernst Düllberg and *Uffz.* Reuter of II./JG 27 on 5 October and next day two further Hurricanes plus three Tomahawks were destroyed by the unit. The *Gruppe* suffered its first pilot loss two days later when it attacked a formation of Marylands of 12 (SAAF) Sqn. and *Lt.* Gustav Adolf Langanke of *5. Staffel* was shot down by return fire and reported missing. Regular skirmishes continued, a major action occurring on 10 October when Tomahawks clashed with Bf 109s of II./JG 27 and shot down six in two operations. However, three pilots from the German unit were lost during the next few days: *Oblt.* Franz Schulz of 6./JG 27 on 17 October, *Uffz.* Paul Lesmeister of II./JG 27 on the 22nd and *Lt.* Jakob Waibel of 1./JG 27 on the 23rd.

Early in the morning of 16 November, a Bombay transport aircraft carrying 16 men from the British Special Air Service (SAS) was shot down by *Ofw.* Otto Schulz of 4./JG 27. The SAS men were part of a force which was to mount the first large-scale sabotage operation against *Luftwaffe* airfields in North Africa, planned for the night of 16/17 November. The remaining men from the unit attempted to attack the dispersal areas of I./JG 27 but were driven off and, as daylight dawned, two Bf 109s from the 2. *Staffel* followed the tyre tracks made by the SAS vehicles, and destroyed them all. Although this

"I was not one of the fighter aces..."

Gerhard Keppler, I./JG 27

I was born on 30 August 1919 in Stuttgart and went to school in Kirchheim unter Teck. My father was director of a school for young adults and in 1928, being very air-minded, he organised a conference in his school where the famous glider pilot Wolf Hirth was present. Hirth told us about his life, his experiences and his enthusiasm for all things connected with aviation. One of the consequences was that, in the evenings, I began to build glider components and this was the beginning of glider activity in the Teck area. Soon, we formed the *Flieger-Hitlerjugend* in our area and upon reaching the age for military service I naturally opted for the air force.

At the end of 1940, I was posted to I./JG 27. *Major* Eduard Neumann was the *Kommandeur*, and my *Staffelkapitän* was *Hptm*. Karl-Wolfgang Redlich. My relationship with Redlich was very good because he really did care about his men. Although he was only four and a half years older than I was, the experience he had acquired in Spain and France set him apart and made a large difference between him and his pilots. We respected him and called him 'Papa' Redlich. I was made to feel particularly welcome by *Uffz.* Albert Espenlaub who came from a village in the same area as mine and taught me a great deal.

Prior to *'Marita'* , the campaign in Yugoslavia, we were stationed at München-Riem. During *'Marita'* we flew from the airfield at Graz/Thalerhof, but we quickly received an order to return to München-Riem before moving to the South. Following the orders, we reached northern Italy before we received a counter-order: we were to return to München in order to take over aircraft equipped for North Africa. The most visible adaptation was the sand filter which we had to close while the aircraft was on the ground and open when in the air.

We were all very glad to be sent to Africa and thus operate in the theatre represented by our *Gruppen* badge and which conjured up visions of faraway places. The welcome we received from our Italian comrades was fantastic, especially when we were their guests in the *Kasino*. There, the wine table was greatly appreciated, sometimes a little too much...

I landed at Tripoli, together with *Hptm*. Neumann's *Schwarm*, on 20 April 1941 after transfer flights through Italy and Sicily. On the 21st I was in Benghazi in North Africa and then flew on to Gazala. There, our contact with the population was rare and I only ever spent a few hours with the locals during which I shared some of their strong tea. Our relationship with them was reasonably friendly since most of them seemed completely unconcerned that we were waging a war in their country.

I made my first victory claim, a P-40, on 2 August 1941. My second, another P-40, followed on 30 May 1942 and my third, a Hurricane, on 28 June 1942. However, I was not one of the so-called fighter aces but was more of a defensive pilot, in which role I was appreciated. Pilots like *Oblt.* Ludwig Franzisket and *Lt.* Hans-Joachim Marseille liked to have me as their wingman as they knew they could rely on me, and I was so busy watching our rear that I hardly had the opportunity to be in a firing position myself. In addition, I often flew ground-attack missions, as well as *Jabo* sorties against boats, and these did not allow me to obtain a long list of aerial victories.

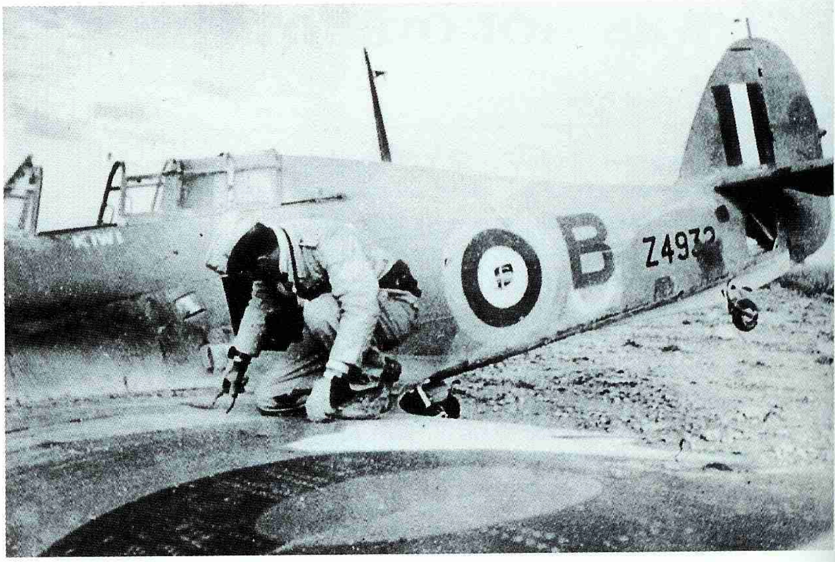
It was not easy to keep mechanical items in working order in the difficult desert conditions and, early on, we were angry when several new aircraft were damaged by ferry-pilots who were unfamiliar with the peculiarities of the Bf 109 and, especially, conditions in the desert. Therefore, we soon decided to ferry our machines from München-Riem ourselves. To do this, four pilots started from Africa in our Bf 108 and flew over the Mediterranean to Italy and thence over the Alps to München. Of course, everyone liked these missions as they offered a chance to survive longer than in Africa where conditions constantly became more dangerous. Our stays in München often allowed us to visit our families, whether only for a few hours or, sometimes, for a few days. We also had an opportunity to bring back personal items for our comrades or material to our unit. We then made the return flight with one of us piloting the Bf 108 and the other three with new Bf 109s. These almost peacetime flights were fantastic. Arriving back in North Africa, we were happy to see our comrades but were also anxious about who might be missing. Later, we changed our route and used Athens as an intermediate landing point between München and Africa.

My friend Albert Espenlaub was the only one in our tent to be spared vermin bites or infection. His mother used to send him cherry brandy which he rubbed all over his body. This worked very well, but we were even more impressed by the fact that his mother succeeded in sending him *Feldpostpäckchen* (army postal service packages) which were always much heavier than permitted. Normally, these packets could weigh no more than 50 grams but her secret was to infer that each package contained only a single item by marking them with a note saying, 'Please forward - contents cannot be separated'.

particular operation had proved a failure, the SAS was later to prove very successful against Axis airfields, eventually destroying over 400 aircraft in North Africa, more in fact than was destroyed by the RAF during the same period.

By this time a dedicated fighter-bomber *Staffel* had been added to JG 27 equipped with Bf 109 E-4/Bs which were capable of carrying four 110 lb SC 50 bombs or one 1,100 lb SC 500 bomb beneath the fuselage. Alternatively known as 10.(*Jabo*)/JG 27 or *Jabostaffel Afrika* the unit carried white identification numbers forward of the fuselage *Balkenkreuz* and a diagonal bomb symbol aft.

On 18 November, British troops under General Auchinleck supported by about 580 tanks, launched a major offensive in North Africa code named *'Crusader'*. The main object of the attack was to relieve the beleaguered garrison at Tobruk. XXX Corps crossed over the Egyptian border into Libya, taking Rommel, who had also been planning an offensive, by surprise. The first major clash between British



ABOVE: The first Hurricane fighters began arriving in the Middle East in September 1940, but this example from an unidentified squadron was shot down much later by Ofw. Otto Schutz. of 4./JG 27, seen here examining his handiwork. This aircraft, serial number Z4932, has the name 'Kiwi' painted under the cockpit.

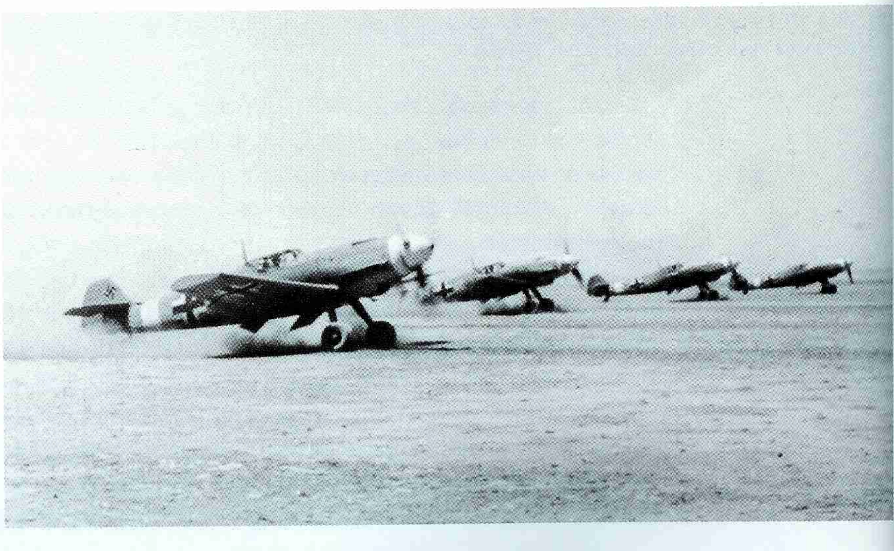
and German air forces came four days later when 13 Allied Hurricane and Tomahawk fighters, one Wellington and seven Blenheim bombers were claimed destroyed by I. and II./JG 27. This was not without loss to the Germans however, who lost six Bf 109s shot down, two pilots from 1./JG 27 being taken prisoner, while the *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 27, *Hptm*. Düllberg, was slightly injured.

By this time, the British ground offensive had run into trouble, and Rommel immediately took the opportunity to counter-attack. He pushed two strong columns back towards the Egyptian frontier which forced the Tobruk garrison to break out from its positions in an attempt to avert disaster. As New Zealand infantry dug in around Sidi Rezegh, both the RAF and the *Luftwaffe* mounted intense efforts to support their respective armies. On 28 November, the New Zealanders managed to link up with the defenders of Tobruk, only for the city to be surrounded again two days later.

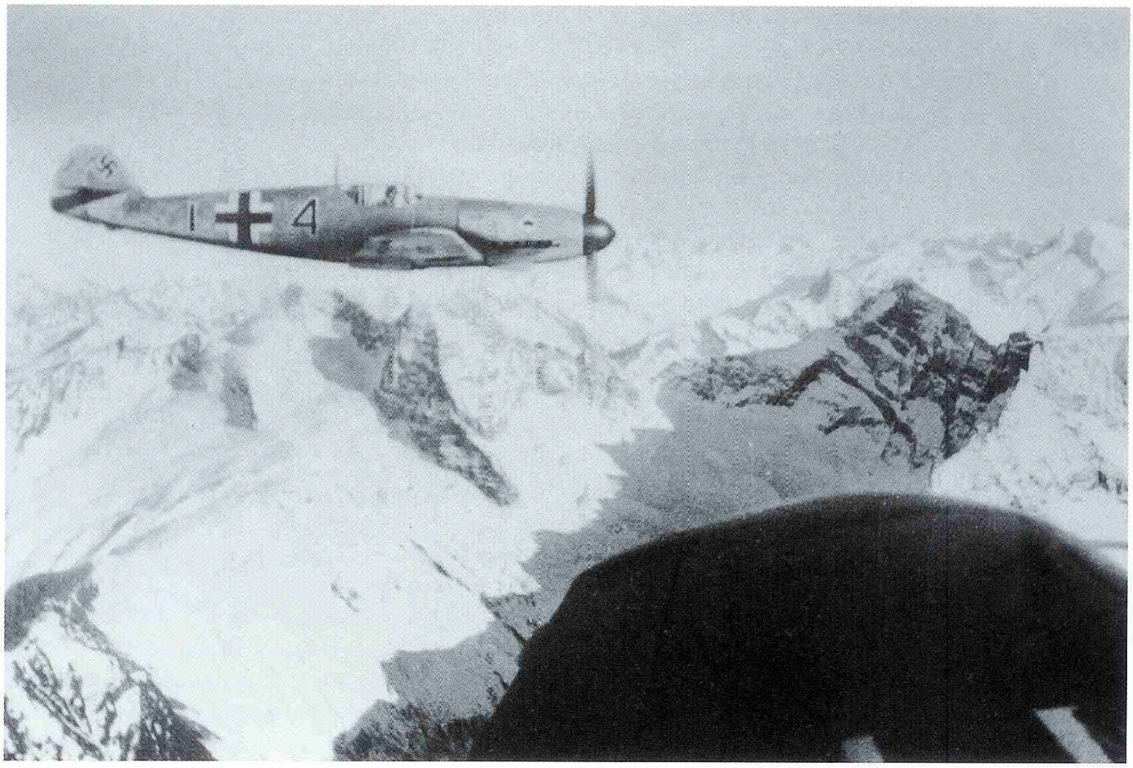
Around this time a third German day fighter *Gruppe* began to arrive in the Mediterranean theatre when ground crews from III./JG 53 under *Hptm.* Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke transferred to Catania in Sicily. The unit, which had previously operated in Central Russia, had recently re-equipped with the new Bf 109 F-4 powered by the 1,350 hp DB 601 E engine and equipped with a 20 mm MG 151/20 cannon firing through the spinner. The original intention was for the unit to strengthen Axis fighter strength in Sicily, but the situation in North Africa was such that by 6 December it was forced to transfer to Tmimi, west of Gazala. Two aircraft were damaged in a bombing attack on the 5th, two others were damaged in belly landings in the next few days, and on 11 December four more aircraft were blown up at Tmimi. Also near Tmimi *Fw*. Franz Elles, a pilot of 2./JG 27 with five victories, was taken prisoner after the oil cooler of his Bf 109 was damaged following combat with a Tomahawk.

Operation *'Crusader'* continued, with Commonwealth troops battering the Gazala line on 13 December. Several air battles took place but while a number of Bf 109s were claimed by Allied pilots, the only confirmed pilot casualties were *Ofw.* Albert Espenlaub of 1./JG 27 who was taken prisoner and *Lt.* Karl Vockelmann of 7./JG 53 who was wounded. Espenlaub, who had 14 victories, was later shot on 25 February 1942 while trying to escape from a PoW camp in Palestine, and Vockelmann was III./JG 53's first casualty in North Africa. On the same day, German pilots claimed five Commonwealth P-40 Tomahawks destroyed, two by *Lt.* Marseille (his 33rd and 34th victories), one by *Oblt.* Homuth (his 31st), one by *Hptm.* Gerlitz (his 10th) and one by *Ofw.* Erich Krenzke of 5./JG 27. Also destroyed was a Blenheim by *Ofw.* Karl-Heinz Bendert of *Stab* II./JG 27 and a Hurricane by *Oblt.* Hans-Joachim Heinecke of 8./JG 53. Next day, *Uffz.* August Nieland of 7./JG 53 and

BELOW: The PzKpfw II was an important part of the German armoured force before the Second World War and played an important part in the Western campaign of 1940. Later, however, it was increasingly employed only for reconnaissance duties.



BELOW: A Schwarm of Bf 109 Fs from 3./JG 27 create a small dust storm as they taxi prior to a mission.



RIGHT: In the Autumn of 1941, Allied action from Malta was having an increasing effect on the German and Italian supply route to North Africa where the German situation was critical. Despite the decisive battles being fought in Russia, elements of Luftflotte 2 were moved to Italy and North Africa. By 28 November, advance elements of III./JG 53 had reached Sicily with the rest of the Gruppe following soon afterwards. In this photograph, taken in early December 1941, 'Black 4' of 8./JG 53 is seen in flight over the Alps during the transfer flight to Sicily. The Gruppe subsequently transferred to North Africa but returned to Sicily after only two weeks.

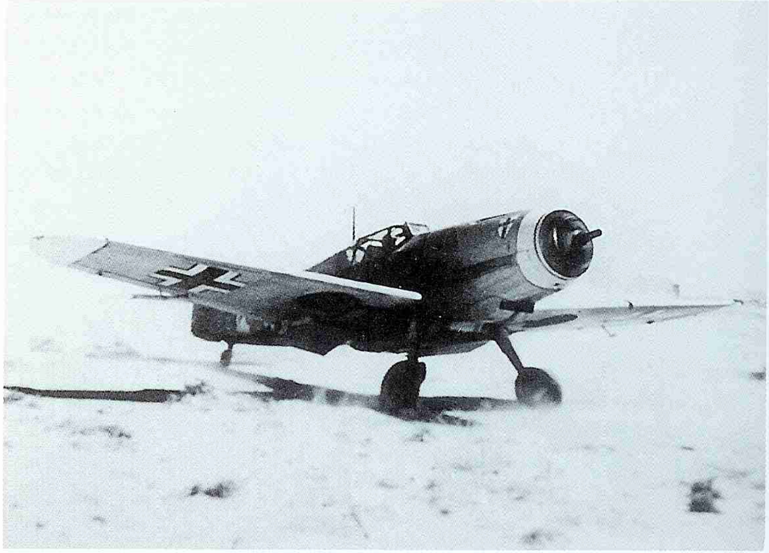
Lt. Wolfgang Ihrig were both killed in combat with Tomahawks while flying an escort mission for dive-bomber attacks on British troop concentrations. Also killed on this day was *Ofw.* Hermann Förster (13 victories) of 1./JG 27 but, in turn, the Germans claimed five RAF aircraft destroyed.

On 16 December, two pilots from III./JG 53 were lost, one of them, the *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 53, *Oblt.* Heinz Altendorf being taken prisoner following hits from British anti-aircraft fire. A final loss by the unit was suffered in North Africa on 19 December when *Fw.* Alfred Seidl was wounded in combat with Marylands. Shortly afterwards the *Gruppe* returned to Sicily where it joined the remainder of the *Geschwader* which had also arrived on the island. To replace III./JG 53, the III. *Gruppe* of JG 27 under *Hptm.* Erhard Braune was transferred to the area from Russia, bringing the *Geschwader* up to full strength. The *Gruppe's Staffelkapitäne* at this time were: *Oblt.* Hermann Tangerding (7./JG 27), *Hptm.* Werner Schroer (8./JG 27) and *Oblt.* Erbo *Graf* von Kageneck (9./JG 27). Kageneck, who had already claimed 65 victories, had been awarded the *Eichenlaub* on 26 October 1941.

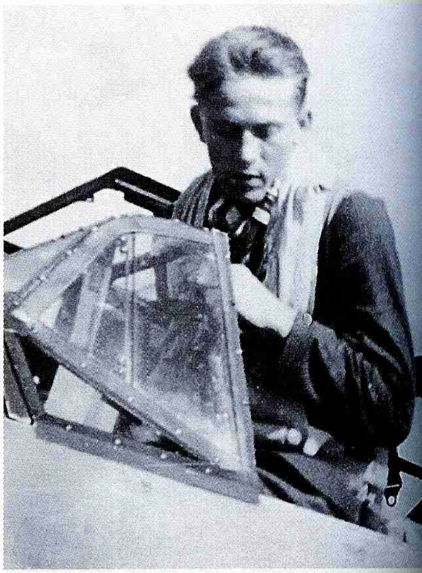
On the morning of 17 December, three days of intensive air attacks against the retreating Axis ground forces began. An Allied formation strafing Axis columns was attacked by 12 Bf 109s of JG 27 and five escorting Hurricanes were claimed, two by Marseille, one by *Lt.* Rudolf Sinner and two by *Lt.* Franzisket. Three of the Commonwealth pilots were killed and a further two injured. A further Hurricane was shot down during the afternoon by *Lt.* Friedrich Hoffmann of I./JG 27.

Regular aerial skirmishes continued for the next few days, but on 24 December, III./JG 27 suffered a severe loss when about six Bf 109 Fs attacked a formation of Hurricanes near Agedabia. The RAF fighters formed a defensive circle, but one of them suddenly broke out and fired on the aircraft piloted by *Oblt.* Erbo *Graf* von Kageneck. The German pilot was hit in the groin and lower stomach and made an emergency landing to the west of Agedabia where he was rescued by Italian soldiers. In spite of an urgent transfer to Italy, on 12 January 1942 he died in a Naples hospital as a result of complications arising from his wounds. He had 67 victories. His successor was the experienced *Lt.* Klaus Faber, promoted to officer rank at this time.

BELOW: Spinnerless Bf 109 F-4 Trop of 8./JG 27 running up its engine, probably after repairs.



Erbo Graf von Kageneck



In 1918, Bonn was still a small, quiet city on the Rhine. It was here that, on 2 April, the fourth of five sons was born, to Karl *Graf* (Count) von Kageneck and *Gräfin* (Countess) Maria, née Schorlemer. At that time, a few months before the end of the First World War, Karl *Graf* von Kageneck commanded a cavalry brigade on the Western Front but, at the end of June, he was captured by Canadian forces and ended the war, relatively comfortably, as a prisoner in England.

Karl *Graf* von Kageneck had seen his son, who had been named Erbo, only for a few hours after the birth, so when the *Graf* was finally freed at the end of 1919 and returned to Germany, he was pleased to be reunited with the young boy. As he grew up, Erbo von Kageneck soon revealed a very strong and dynamic personality, but at the beginning of the 20th century, life for the German nobility was difficult. The aftermath of defeat, the loss of the German colonies, a reduction in the strength of the Army, an economic crisis coupled with political upheaval and social unrest all greatly affected the nobility and its earlier way of life.

After Hitler was appointed Chancellor in January 1933, most German institutions were brought, to a greater or lesser extent, under Nazi control and considerable attention was given to the activities of the young. A network of organisations for boys and girls was established, probably the best known being the Hitler Youth, which projected an image of vitality and energy. By no means a pompous or old-fashioned boy, Erbo was attracted by the vigour and activities of the Hitler Youth and became a member. Later, at the age of 17, he began his period of compulsory service in the *Arbeitsdienst* and worked hard for six months on the construction of a road in the Hunsrück area, one of many being built at that time which, it was believed, would fascilitate rapid troop movements should Germany's borders be threatened.[1]

A year later, at the age of 18, von Kageneck joined the *Luftwaffe*. Still too inexperienced as a pilot to be sent to Spain with the Legion Condor, he ended his training as a fighter pilot in early 1939 and thus benefited enormously from three years of excellent peacetime training. In the Spring of 1939, he was posted as a *Leutnant* to 2./JG 1. This *Staffel*, part of *Major* Bernhard Woldenga's I./JG 1, was under the command of *Oblt.* Walter Adolph, who had gained front-line experience, and his first victory, in Spain. Later, both Adolph and von Kageneck would become 2. *Staffel's* most successful pilots.

The campaign in Poland, which opened on 1 September 1939, was too short to allow von Kageneck or his comrades any opportunity to claim victories. Indeed, the *Gruppe* had no contact at all with the Polish Air Force and, for 2./JG 1, the only notable event of the campaign was that another *Staffel* officer, *Lt.* Heinrich Sanneman, was lightly wounded by ground fire. On 3 September, France and Great Britain declared war on Germany and I./JG 1 was transferred to Vörden, from which base it was to protect Germany's western border against any offensive. Again, however, this period was so quiet that it became known as the *Sitzkrieg*, or "Phoney War", and in the next eight-month period, I./JG 1 claimed only three *Abschüsse*, including one by *Oblt.* Walter Adolf. In March 1940, the *Gruppe* was moved to Gymnich, close to Erbo's home-town of Bonn, and from where the unit's operational history really began.

The *Westfeldzug* opened on 10 May with audacious airborne operations. Parachute troops captured intact two vital bridges between Holland and Belgium and, on the 11th, *Fallschirmjäger* landed in gliders and captured the Belgian fortress of Eben-Emaël before its guns could destroy the bridges at Veldwezelt and Vroenhoven. The destruction of these two bridges soon became a priority for the Allied Staff and several waves of bombers were sent to destroy them.[2] The task of protecting the Liège-Maastricht sector and the captured bridges fell to I./JG 1, now under the command of *Hptm.* Joachim Schlichting.

The first combats took place at 06.50 hrs on 11 May against the Belgian Air Force's obsolete Fairey Battles escorted by Gladiator biplanes, and in the late afternoon, I./JG 1 encountered French LeO 451 bombers escorted by MS 406s. By the end of the day, claims for 12 *Abschüsse* had been submitted, but neither Erbo nor his *Staffelkapitän* were among the successful pilots as they were based in another sector when the Allies launched their attacks. The next day, however, these two pilots became involved in combat over the Maastricht area, *Oblt.* Adolph claiming three Blenheims and Erbo von Kageneck opening his tally with two. To keep up with the advancing ground forces, on 16 May, I./JG 1 moved to Charleville in France. Now, Hurricanes and French fighters would be the most common opponents but the newly-promoted *Oblt.* von Kageneck had to wait until 5 June before he was able claim his third victim, a Morane near Roye. For a short time, his *Gruppe* was then based at Tupigny and on 17 June I./JG 1 claimed no fewer than 15 LeO 451s destroyed in the Roye/Beauvais/Noyon sector. Two of these were claimed by *Oblt.* Adolph and one by *Oblt.* von Kageneck. At the same time, a certain *Hptm.* Wilhelm Balthasar claimed three LeO 451s and a Morane to bring his total number of victories to 21.

By the time of the French armistice with Germany on 22 June, I./JG 1 had claimed 81 victories in return for five pilots killed or missing in action and four wounded, plus two who had been captured but

ABOVE: Erbo von Kageneck seated in the cockpit of a Bf 110.

who would soon return to their *Staffeln*. Now credited with a total of four victories, *Oblt*. Erbo von Kageneck was the second most successful pilot of his *Staffel* after *Oblt.* Adolph.

On 30 June, I./JG 1 moved to Plumetot, near Caen, and on 2 July to Carquebut near Ste. Mère Eglise in Normandy, from where the *Gruppe* would be engaged in the Battle of Britain. Three days later, I./JG 1 was officially renamed III./JG 27, although it is not clear if the members of the *Gruppe* were aware of the change since the unit itself did not adopt the new designation until mid-September. In any event, the redesignation could hardly have come as a surprise since the *Gruppe* had for several weeks operated under the command of *Stab/*JG 27.

On 19 July, 2./JG 1 (8./JG 27) had its first combat of the Battle of Britain when, between 18.25 and 18.40 hrs, it became involved in an air battle with Hurricanes over the Isle of Wight. Five of the enemy aircraft were claimed as destroyed, including one by *Oblt.* Adolph and two by *Oblt.* von Kageneck. However, the battle was extremely hard-fought and Kageneck received slight wounds when his cockpit was hit and fragments from the canopy entered his left eye. Nevertheless, he was able to bring his aircraft back but, while making an emergency landing, his head struck the *Revi* gunsight and he received slight concussion. As a result of this incident, Erbo was sent back to Germany for three weeks' convalescent leave.

Von Kageneck's next victory occurred at 15.30 hrs on 18 August when he shot down a Spitfire off Bognor Regis. His wingman, *Fw.* Franz Blazytko, claimed a Hurricane at the same time and location. Von Kageneck's eighth and final victory while with 2./JG 1 (8./JG 27) occurred at 19.40 hrs on 9 September when he shot down a Spitfire near Rochford.

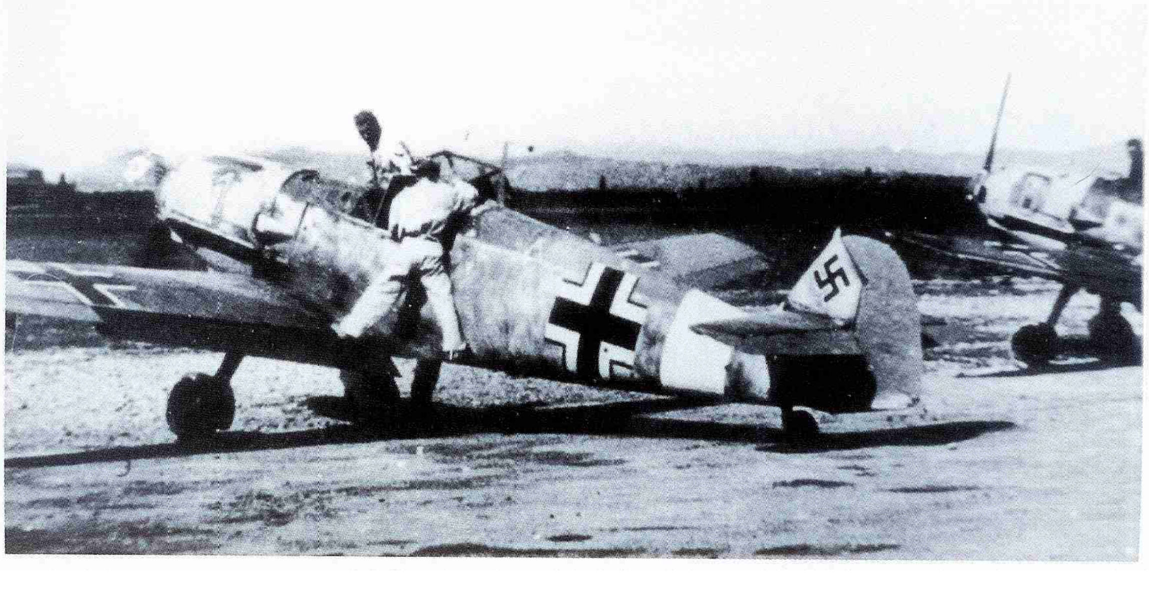
A few days earlier, on 6 September, the *Kommandeur* of III./JG 27, *Hptm.* Joachim Schlichting, had been shot down and captured near Shoeburyness. As a result of this loss, *Hptm.* Max Dobislav, the former *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 27 was appointed as his replacement and command of the 9. *Staffel* passed to *Oblt.* von Kageneck, this move becoming official on 18 September. The appointment of von Kageneck as *Staffelkapitän* proved particularly suitable as, two days after having taken command of the unit, he claimed a Hurricane as his ninth victory. The tenth, another Hurricane, followed on 29 September and on 13, 15 and 27 October, he claimed one Hurricane and two Spitfires respectively.

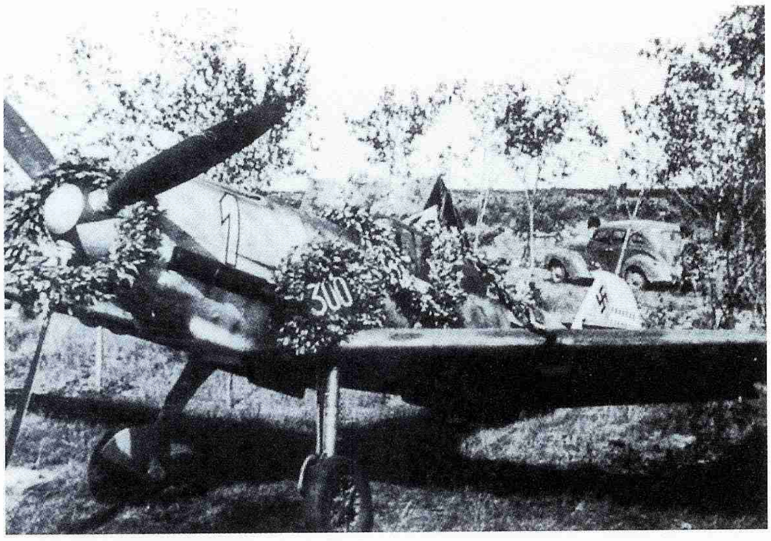
In November, when there was a lull in combat over England due to the onset of poor weather, III./JG 27 was recalled to Vechta, in Germany to rest. However, the rest period was cut short by Italy's catastrophic invasion of Greece which resulted in British forces being sent to the area. *Wehrmacht* intervention in the Balkans was now necessary in order to protect the oilfields in Rumania from possible attack by Royal Air Force units in Greece and, in January 1941, III./JG 27 moved first to Bucharest and then to Belica in Bulgaria. On 6 April, a new *Blitzkrieg* started with the German invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece, during which the *Gruppe* was mainly engaged in ground support missions. That day, 9./JG 27 avoided a catastrophe when Hurricanes of 33 Sqn surprised the Bf 109s of Erbo's former 8. *Staffel*, killing two of its pilots. Two other shot-down pilots were captured. At the end of the Balkan campaign, the *Gruppe* was based in early May at Eleusis, in Greece. Although without a victory which might have compensated for the losses of 6 April, the unit would again soon be in combat with Hurricanes.

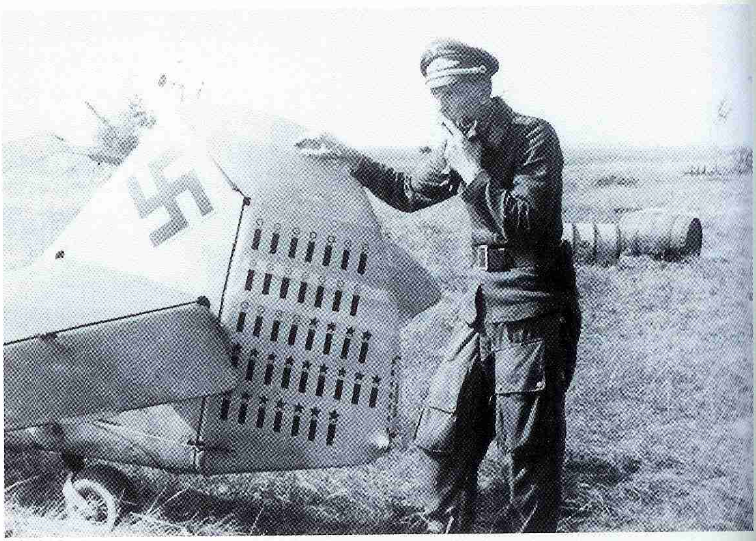
On 2 May, III./JG 27 flew to Gela, an airfield in southern Sicily, with only a handful of technicians. Its task was to reinforce X *Fliegerkorps,* then engaged in operations against the island fortress of Malta. At that time, there was only one *Jagdstaffel* operating against Malta, the famous 7./JG 26, or 'Red Heart' *Staffel*, under *Oblt.* Joachim Müncheberg. Although only based on Sicily for some three weeks, the *Gruppe* claimed five victories in return for only one pilot slightly wounded, and it was here that *Oblt.* von Kageneck became

BELOW: Oblt. von Kageneck photographed in the Winter of 1940/41 during a shooting expedition

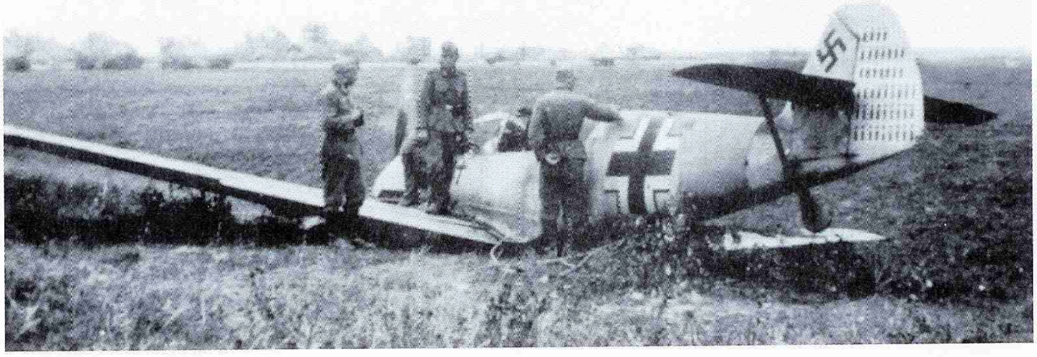
BELOW: Oblt. von Kageneck warming up the engine of his 'Brown 1' at Gela. Note that the code number is applied directly over the yellow engine cowling whereas the number on 'Brown 8', to the right, is on a circular, camouflaged background.







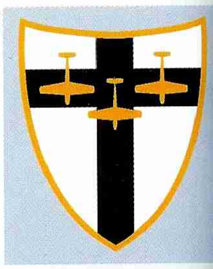
ABOVE AND ABOVE RIGHT: Oblt. Graf von Kageneck and his 'Yellow 1' in August 1941 after he had completed his 300th operational mission. Note the unusual spinner decoration (*TOP LEFT*) and that the spaces remaining at the end of some rows of victory bars were completed later. At this time, the rudder of von Kageneck's aircraft carried 38 victory bars, the last being a Soviet SB bomber shot down north-east of Golino on 10 August.



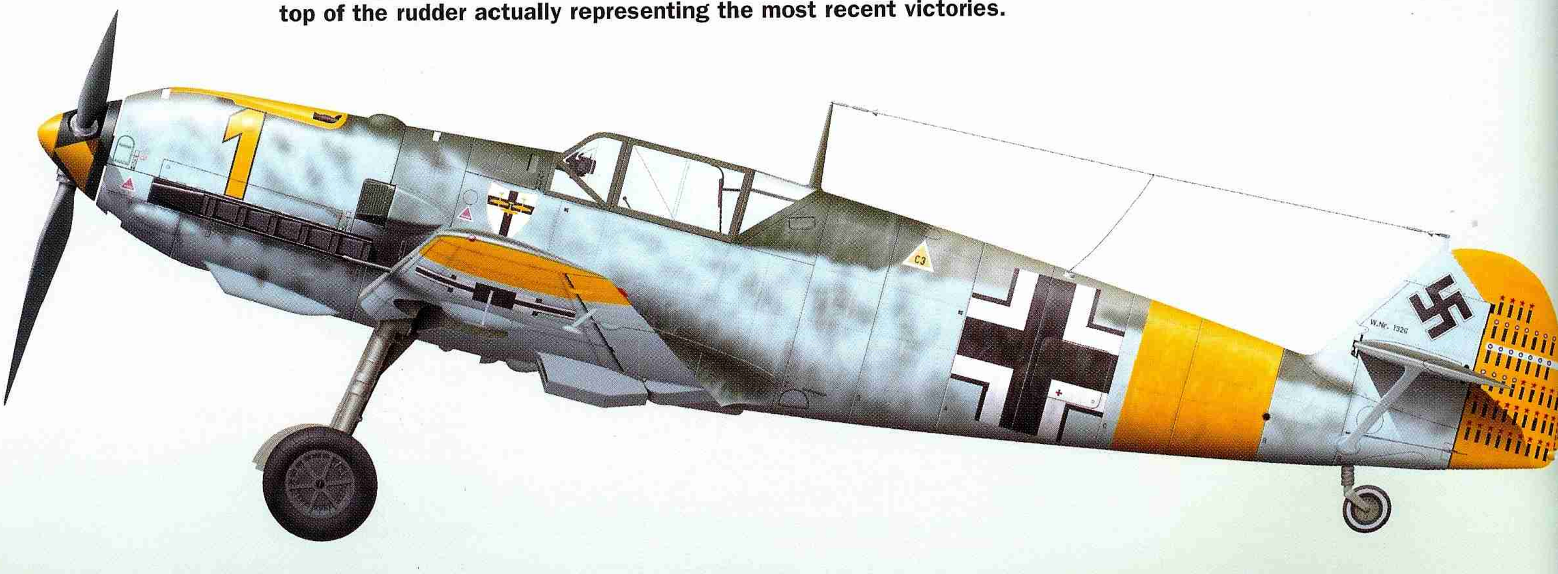
LEFT: Oblt. von Kageneck's 'Yellow 1' following an emergency landing at Chudovo in northern Russia on 20 August 1941. Note that the rudder now carries a total of 45 Abschussbalken, the most recent being shown on the top row.

Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 flown by Oblt. Erbo Graf von Kageneck, Staffelkapitän of 9/JG 27, Russia, August 1941

This aircraft, 'Yellow 1', W.Nr. 1326, is believed to have been camouflaged in an 02/71/65 scheme. The wings and fuselage top decking would have been finished in the standard splinter pattern of 02/71, with the Blue 65 fuselage sides darkened with mottles of 71 and occasionally 02. A predominantly Blue 65 replacement engine cowling has been fitted which has been lightly mottled with Green 71, and a total of 45 victory bars have been added to the rudder. Note, however, that as the pilot's victory tally increased, space on the rudder became a problem and some repositioning and repainting of the roundels became necessary. Some rows were therefore completed retrospectively, the row of four bars at the top of the rudder actually representing the most recent victories.



III./JG 27 badge



an outstanding personality, claiming four of the *Gruppe's* five victories, all Hurricanes, on 6, 13, 14 and 20 May. The fifth was awarded to the *Kommandeur*, *Hptm*. Max Dobislav.

On 24 May, the *Gruppe* was once again withdrawn to Germany. Its next theatre of operations would be in Russia and, by 12 June, III./JG 27 was already well established at Sobolevo from where, on the 22nd, it launched its first operation against Latvia. In a letter to his family, von Kageneck described his first mission against the Soviet Union:

"I spent the night, or rather the two hours that remained of it, in a real turmoil of emotion because we know that facing us there are 3,000 enemy aircraft. Our first take-off was at dawn, escorting Stukas. A fantastic picture! The sky in the east is blood-red and below us there are the flashes and explosions of a great artillery duel. Our first attack was launched against a large airfield near Grodno where we discovered 50 aircraft and a garrison which we caught completely by surprise. They only woke up when, from a height of 20 m, we opened fire!"

Erbo von Kageneck was the first pilot in his *Gruppe* to claim a victory on that day, an SB-2 south of Vilna at 18.50 hrs. On the 27th he destroyed three SB-2s south of Minsk, bringing his total to 21. His 22nd followed on 8 July and by 20 July his total had risen to 30. Ten days later, with a score of 37 victories, he was awarded the *Ritterkreuz*. He was similarly successful during August, when he claimed no fewer than 15 victories including five on the 14th and three on the 29th, but on 20 August, he was himself hit by a J-18 and forced to make an emergency landing near Chudovo. His 'Yellow 1' was 50 per cent damaged but von Kageneck himself was unhurt and the circumstances under which he was later rescued under enemy fire by an Fw 58 *'Weihe'*, is described here by Franz Fuchs, one of the crew members involved:

"I was the Wart, or chief mechanic of the Fw 58 'Weihe'. The Geschwaderstab of JG 27 had moved to Soltzy on 18 August and on the 20th Ofw. Erwin Sawallisch approached me and said, "Fuchs, prepare the 'Weihe'! We are going to rescue Kageneck from Ilmensee, near Novgorod."

I started manually cranking both engines and we took off at 10.55 hrs. By 11.25 we had flown the 70 km or so to our objective where, below us, I could see someone waving his arms to attract our attention. 'Thank God he's still there', said Sawallisch, and we landed as close to Kaganeck as we could. However, as we touched down, we could hear weapons firing. The Russians had seen us.

We kept the engines running and, while our comrade sprinted towards us, we turned the machine into the wind so that we would be in the right direction to take off again without delay. As soon as Kageneck reached the aircraft, Sawallisch gave the engines full power and we took off, still under fire from the Russians. Fortunately, they did not hit us and by noon we were safely back at Soltzy again."

Although the III./JG 27 was still equipped with the Bf 109 E-7, it claimed approximately 220 victories in Russia before, in mid-October, it began transferring back to Berlin/Döberitz, in Germany where the unit finally received the Bf 109 F-4. By that time, the 9./JG 27's *Staffelkapitän* had claimed another 14 victories, bringing his total to 65 and placing him far ahead of any other pilot in III./JG 27. On 26 October, *Hptm*. Gordon Gollob and *Oblt*. Erbo *Graf* von Kageneck were received in Rastenburg by the *Führer* who personally presented them with the *Eichenlaub* as the 38th and 39th members of the *Wehrmacht* to receive this award. Although the subsequent celebration at *Führer Hauptquartier* was subdued due to Hitler's dislike of alcohol, *Reichsmarschall* Göring compensated for this necessarily reserved eventuality by sending a crate of Sekt, German champagne, to the von Kageneck family home.

Once again the *Gruppe's* rest was short, for on 6 December the *Staffeln* began their transfer to North Africa. This move was not without drama for, on the 9th, two Ju 52s which were transporting the *Gruppe's* material and personnel were attacked in error by an Italian fighter. Six men died and a further four were severely burnt. The other Ju 52 was also hit and barely reached its intended destination at Tmimi. It was on this airfield that III./JG 27 was first based and in this area that, on 12 December, *Oblt*. Erbo *Graf* von Kageneck claimed his last two victories, a P-40 and a Hurricane, as his 66th and 67th. However, this was the time of Operation *Crusader*, the British advance into Libya which eventually compelled the Axis forces to evacuate Cyrenaica, and on that day, III./JG 27 began to transfer back to Martuba, thence to Magrum, south of Benghazi, and from there to El Agheila.

Oblt. Erbo *Graf* von Kageneck's last aerial combat occurred on 24 December and resulted in him being severely wounded. He managed to land his Bf 109 F-4 *Trop* west of Agedabia, but as *Hptm*. Erhard Braune, former *Staffelkapitän* of the 7. *Staffel* and at that time *Kommandeur* of III./JG 27, recalled:

"During the afternoon, we saw a large formation of Australian aircraft above us. We quickly reached their altitude and a dog-fight followed. On my right, I saw a German pilot attacked by an Australian. I recognised Erbo's voice when he said that he had been hit. He dived away and the Australian did not follow him. I was able to locate Erbo and escorted him to our lines. I saw that he made a successful crash-

LEFT: The Führer presenting the Oak Leaves to Hptm. Gordon Gollob (left) and Oblt. Erbo Graf von Kageneck, Rastenburg, 26 October 1941.

landing in the desert, not too far from the front. I saw him climb out of his cockpit and lay down on the wing of his aircraft. He pointed to his lower stomach area to indicate where he was wounded. I worried about the severity of his wounds but never imagined that they would prove fatal."

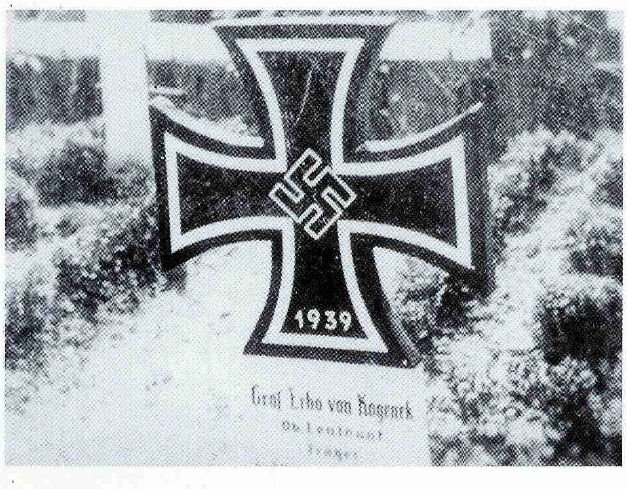
Soon afterwards, three Italians drove out to the site of the crash-landing in a Fiat. They found von Kageneck still lying on the left wing of his Bf 109. He had tried to bandage himself but he was bleeding profusely from terrible wounds: he had been hit in the lower abdomen and groin and had been emasculated.

The wounded *Graf* was carefully brought back to the nearest Axis position and underwent his first operation during the evening of 24 December. The next day, on the personal orders of *Generalfeldmarschall* Kesselring, he was transported to the Central *Luftwaffe* Hospital in Athens where doctors discovered his condition to be extremely serious; the pilot had not only been hit in his genitals but his right leg had also been seriously injured and he had lost his right kidney. Even worse, it was found that the phosphorous in the incendiary or tracer rounds which had hit him had caused the onset of blood poisoning.

With the last of his strength, and with the help of a nurse - who later explained that she never saw a man battle, as he had, against the inevitable - Erbo wrote a final letter of farewell to his family. In a faint, barely recognisable hand, he briefly explained that he had been wounded in an attack from below, hence the nature of his wounds. This letter was received by the *Gräfin* von Kageneck during the first days of 1942. She immediately caught a train to Berlin where, as Göring personally had agreed to transfer the wounded man to the *Reich's* capital, her son would receive further medical care. By this time, however, von Kageneck was already in a coma and he died in Napoli in Italy on 12 January 1942 without regaining consciousness. The *Gräfin* arrived in Napoli on the 13th and saw her son for the last time. He was buried the next day.

Years later, some sources have suggested that the Australian ace Clive Caldwell had been responsible for shooting down Erbo's aircraft. He had been flying a Curtiss Tomahawk, serial number AK 498, and simply recorded in his log book, 'Bf 109 damaged'.

ABOVE: Maria Gräfin von Kageneck arriving at her son's funeral and (*ABOVE RIGHT*) seated (right) during the service.

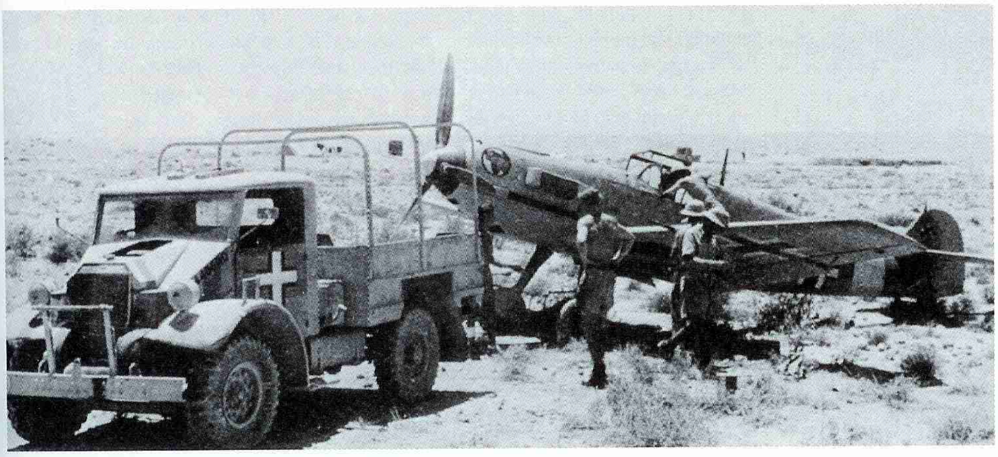


LEFT: The original headstone marking the grave o Erbo Graf von Kageneck. After the war, headstones bearing the swastika were replaced and, in many cases, bodies were exhumed and relocated. In 1975 Erbo von Kageneck's remains were finally transferred to a cemetery near Monte Cassino where he joined thousands of other Germans kille in the fighting in this area.

---

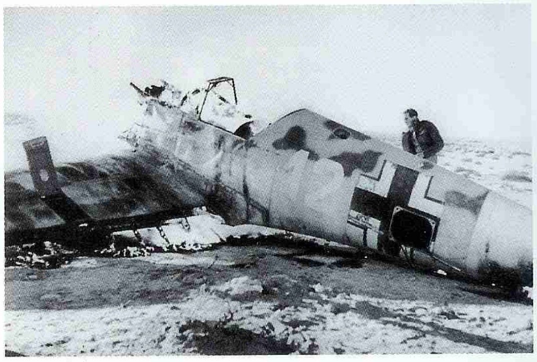
1. Editor's Note: The military importance of the autobahns has been exaggerated; the German railway system was of far greater significance.

2 With their attention devoted to these bridges, the Allies missed the opportunity to mount an adequate aerial response against German forces which had already crossed the bridges and had advanced to the Sedan area where a far more serious situation was developing.

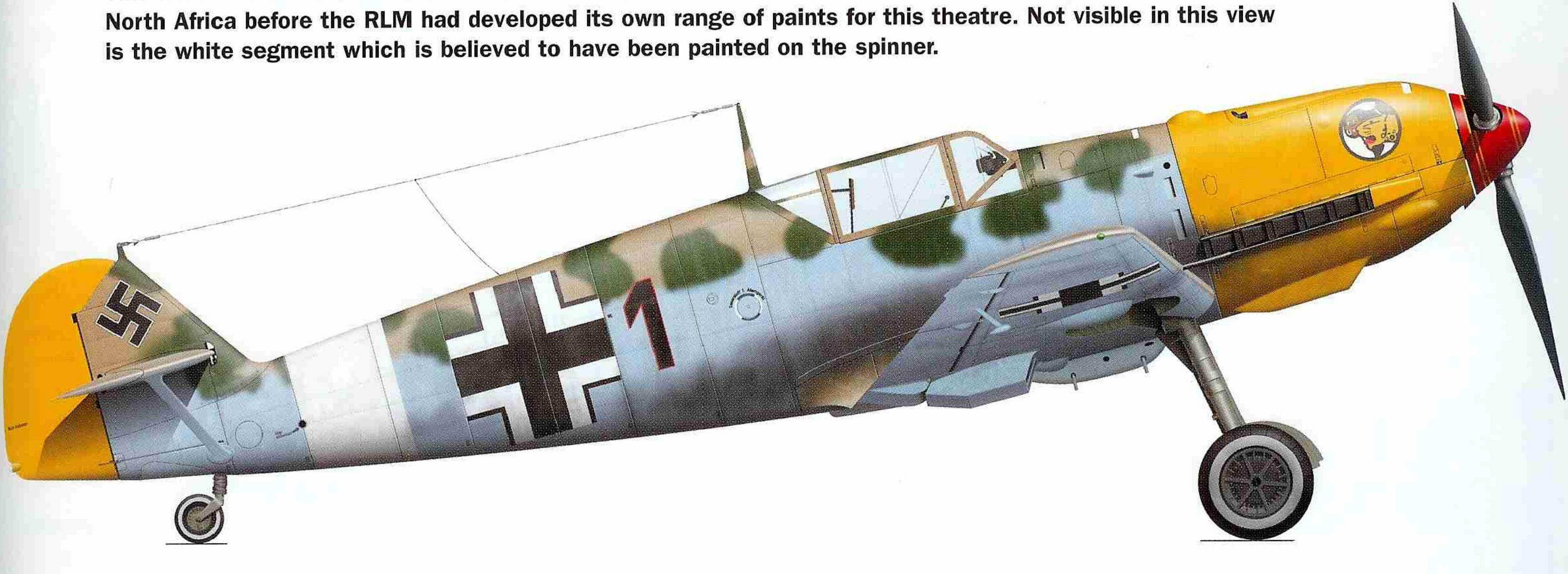


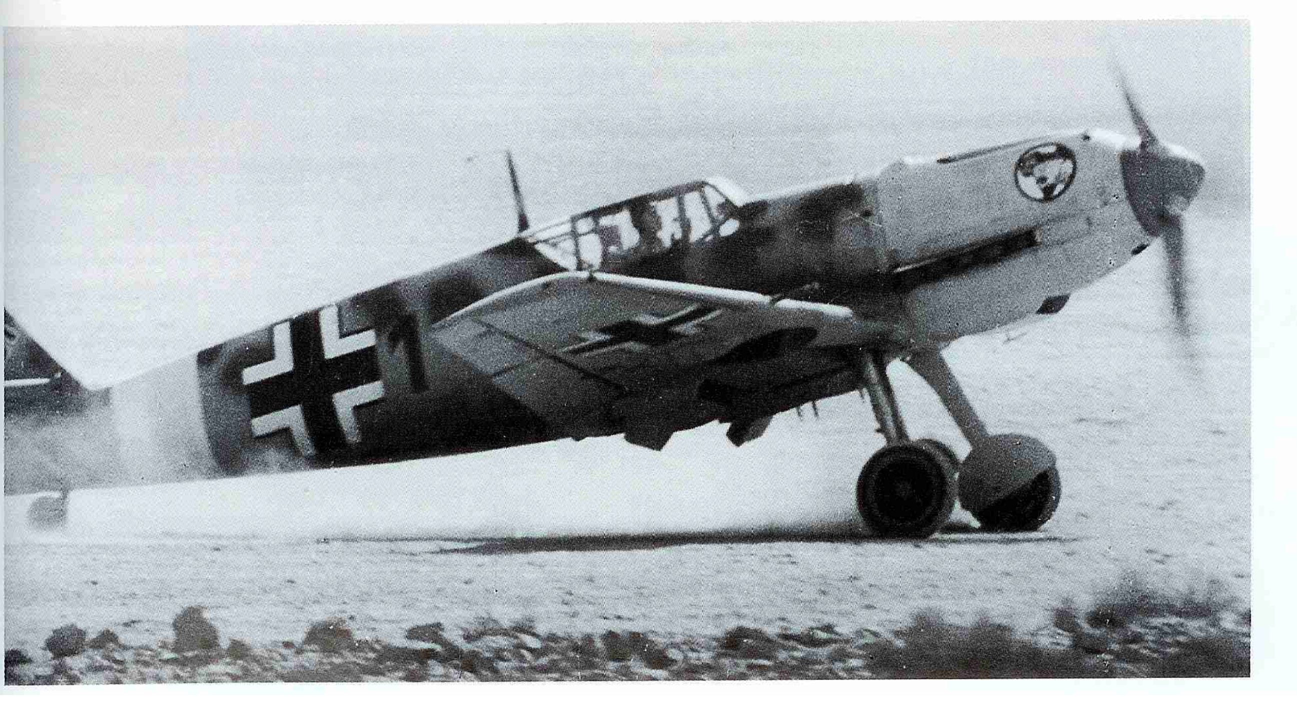
ABOVE: Luftwaffe ground staff working on a Bf 109 E-7 of I./JG 27. Note that the vehicle parked in the foreground is a captured Ford CMP truck. For most of the desert war, identifying friend from foe was particularly difficult as both sides used mainly British vehicles and, according to Rommel, in July 1942, 85 per cent of his transport consisted of captured enemy vehicles.

BELOW: When British troops first found this Bf 109 E-7, 'White 12' of 1./JG 27, in late 1941, its engine had already been removed but the rest of the airframe was relatively intact and was still standing on its wheels. The remains were then set alight and photographed for propaganda purposes. Eventually, the undercarriage collapsed and the wreck burned out.

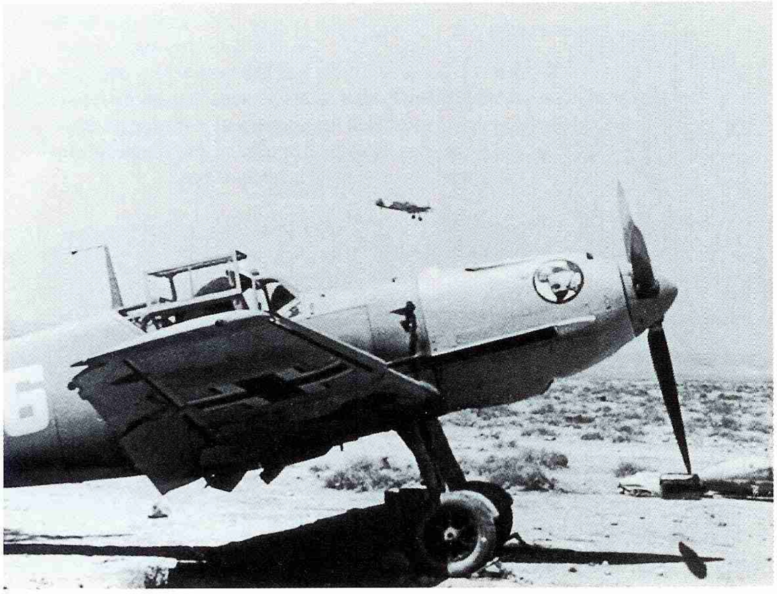


Messerschmitt BF 109 E-7 Trop flown by the Staffelkapitän of 2./JG 27
This aircraft is believed to have been finished in the Italian colours used by Luftwaffe aircraft operating in North Africa before the RLM had developed its own range of paints for this theatre. Not visible in this view is the white segment which is believed to have been painted on the spinner.

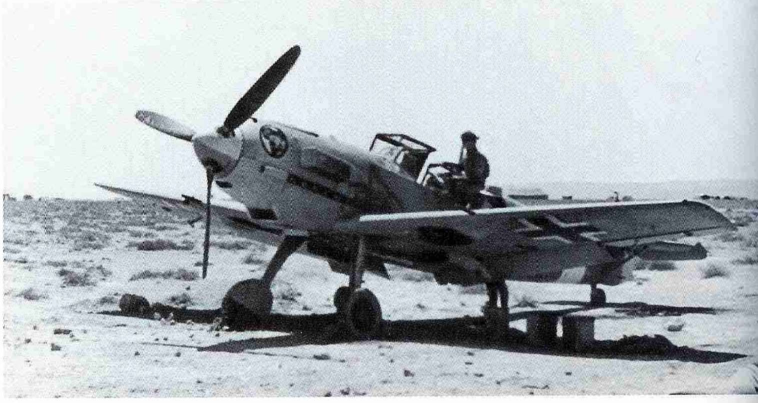


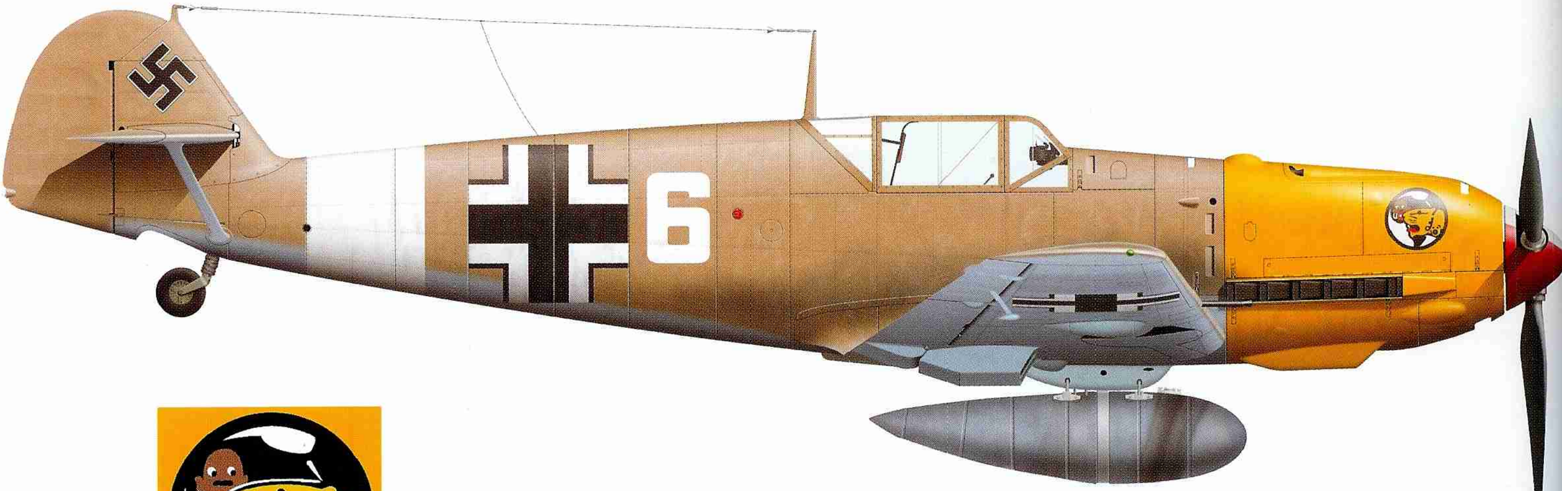


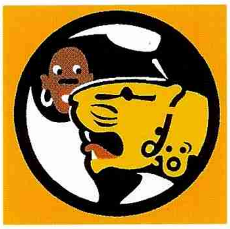
LEFT: This Bf 109 E-7 Trop coded 'Black 1' would normally have been allocated to the Staffelkapitän of 2./JG 27. When this Staffel arrived in North Africa in December 1941, it was under the command of Hptm. Erich Gerlitz who retained command only until 25 December when he left to take over II. Gruppe. He was replaced by Oblt. Fritz Keller who then led the Staffel from 24 January to 18 March 1942.



LEFT AND BELOW: A Bf 109 E-7 Trop of 1./JG 27, 'White 6' at Gazala. Pilots who returned to Germany to collect new aircraft have remarked that the only externa difference between their standard Bf 109s and those intended for North Africa was that the latter were fitted with a dust filter and it is assumed from this that such aircraft still retained their European schemes. Presumably, therefore, the new Sand 79 paint scheme was applied in transit, probably in Sicily.



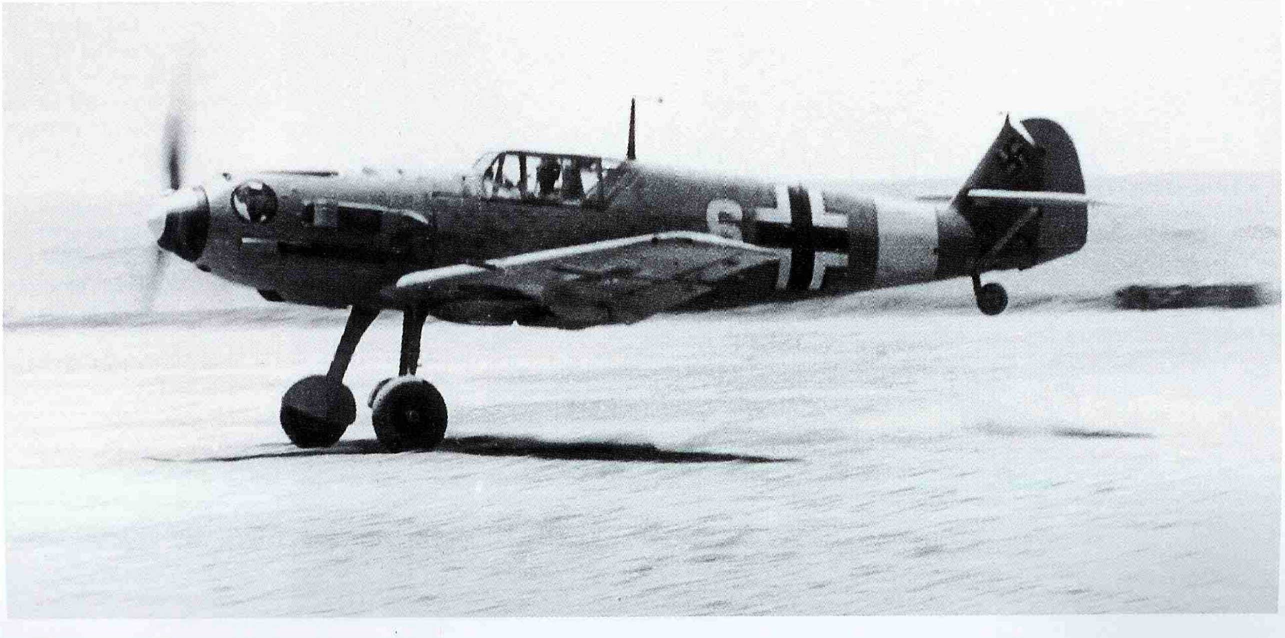




I./JG 27 badge

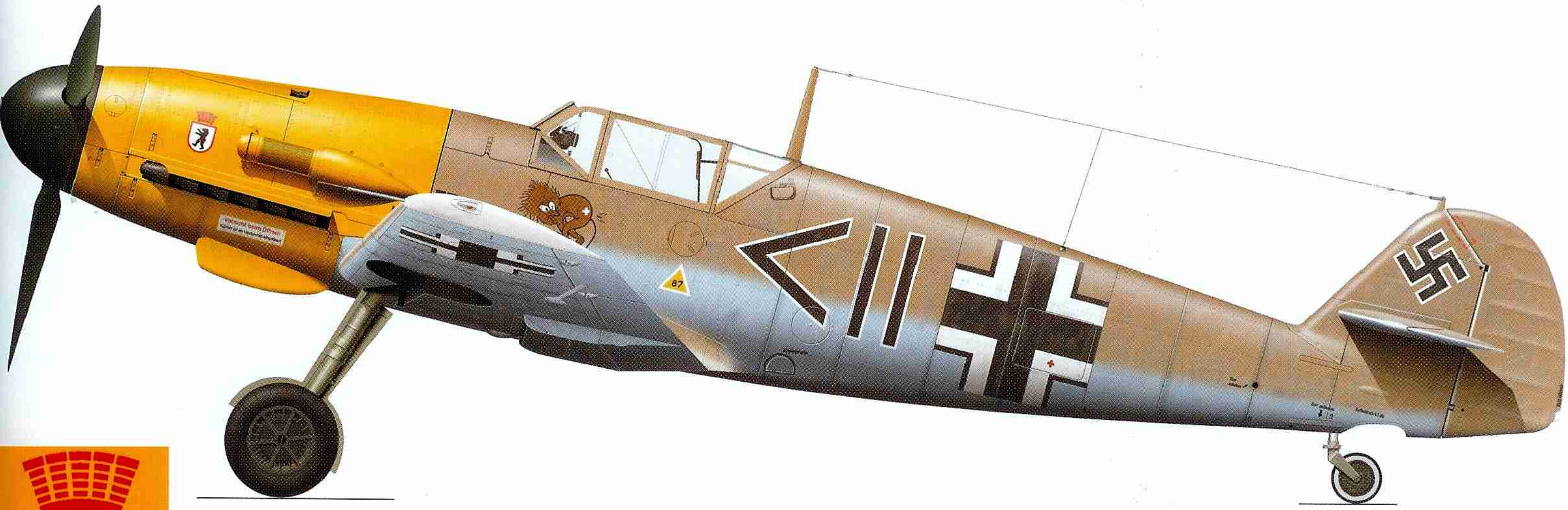
Messerschmitt Bf 109 E-7 Trop 'White 6' of 1./JG 27, Gazala, 1941

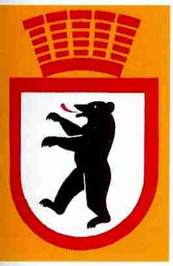
Finished in Sand Yellow 79 and Blue 78 colours, this aircraft is typical of the low-demarcation scheme applied after the earlier mottled scheme was discontinued. The engine cowling is yellow and the spinner is red with a white segment.



LEFT: Another, almost identical 'White 6' to that shown above.

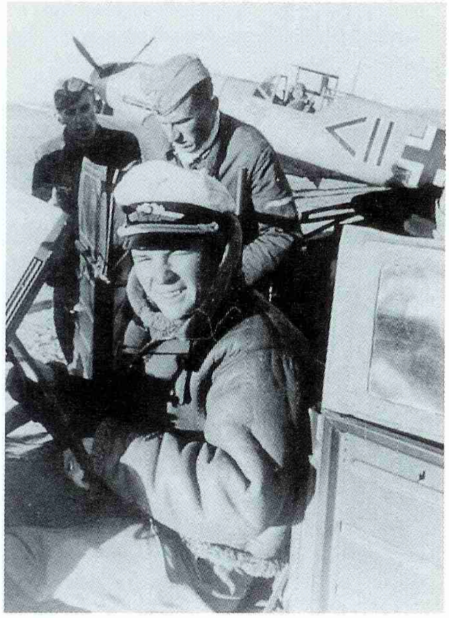
November 1941-January 1942



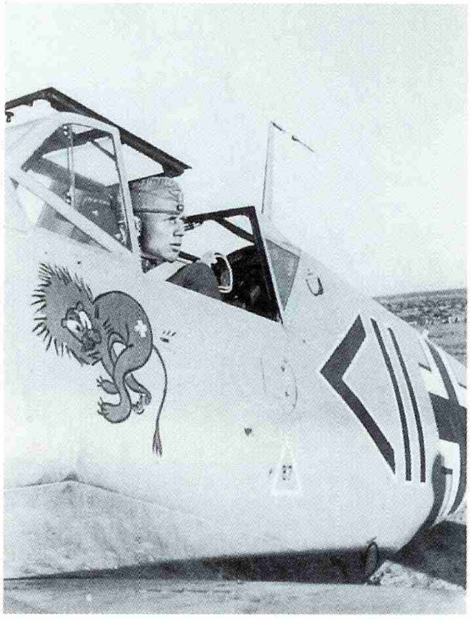


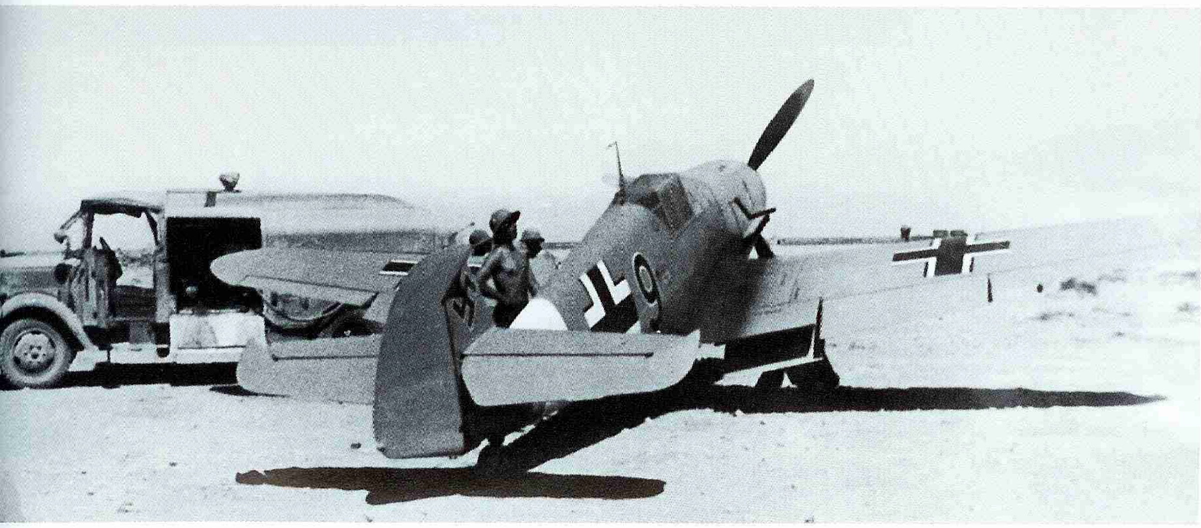
II./JG 27 badge

Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 Trop of Stab II./JG 27, December 1941
This aircraft was finished in a standard mid-demarcation 78/79 camouflage scheme but lacked the usual white spinner and the nose and fuselage bands normally associated with the North African theatre of operations. The II./JG 27 arrived in North Africa in the Summer of 1941 and the effect of the sun has faded and bleached the paintwork. As the emblem below the cockpit is clearly that of Stab II./JG27, the black and white Stab markings, sometimes identified as denoting an aircraft flown by a Major of the Geschwader Stab are thought in this instance to have another significance, possibly indicating that the aircraft was flown by the Gruppe Technical Officer.

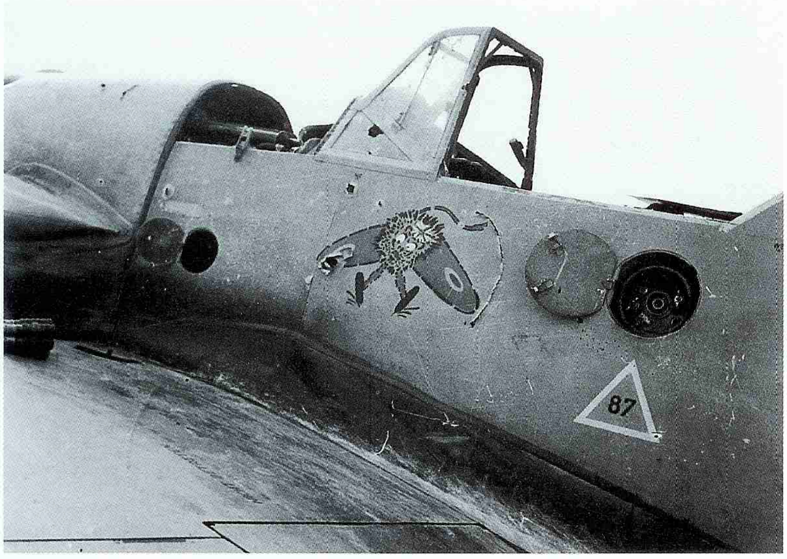


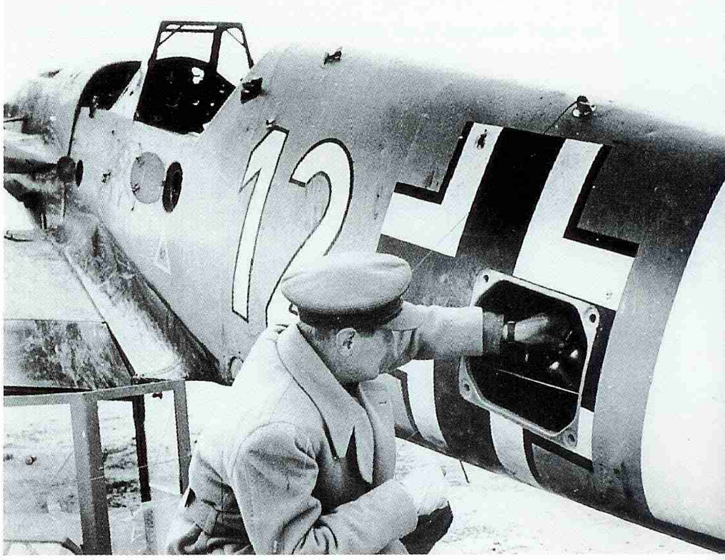
LEFT AND RIGHT: Two photographs showing a Bf 109 F-4 Trop of Gruppenstab II./JG 27, probably in December 1941. Seated in the cockpit (*RIGHT*) is Ofw. Otto Schulz of 4./JG 27 who was awarded the Ritterkreuz on 22 February 1942. It is believed that in this photograph, one of a series taken at the same time, Schulz was merely posing in the cockpit as at this time he had his own machine coded 'White 2' and did not join the Gruppenstab until he had been promoted to Oberleutnant in May 1942. The driver of the Kubelwagen, (*LEFT*) is Lt. Ernst Boerngen who, at the time of this photograph flew with the 5. Staffel and was also the Gruppe Technical Officer. By the end of December 1941, Boerngen had a score of six confirmed kills.
Note that this view confirms the aircraft depicted in the profile had an all-yellow engine cowling.

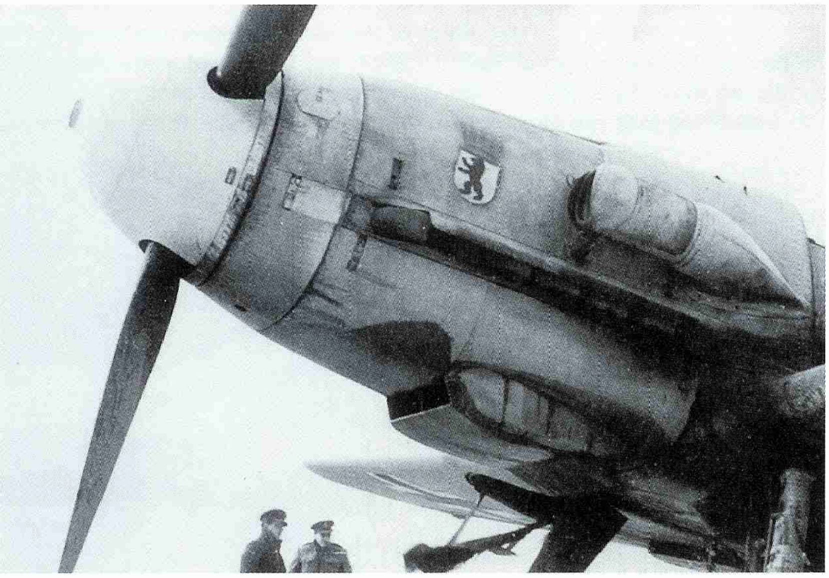




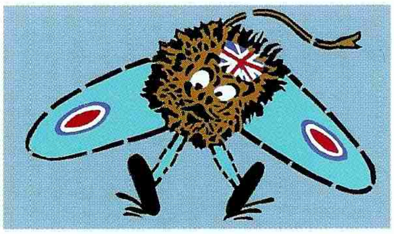
LEFT: Ground staff refuelling the Bf 109 F-4 Trop 'Black 9' of 5./JG 27, probably in November 1941 at El Gazala.







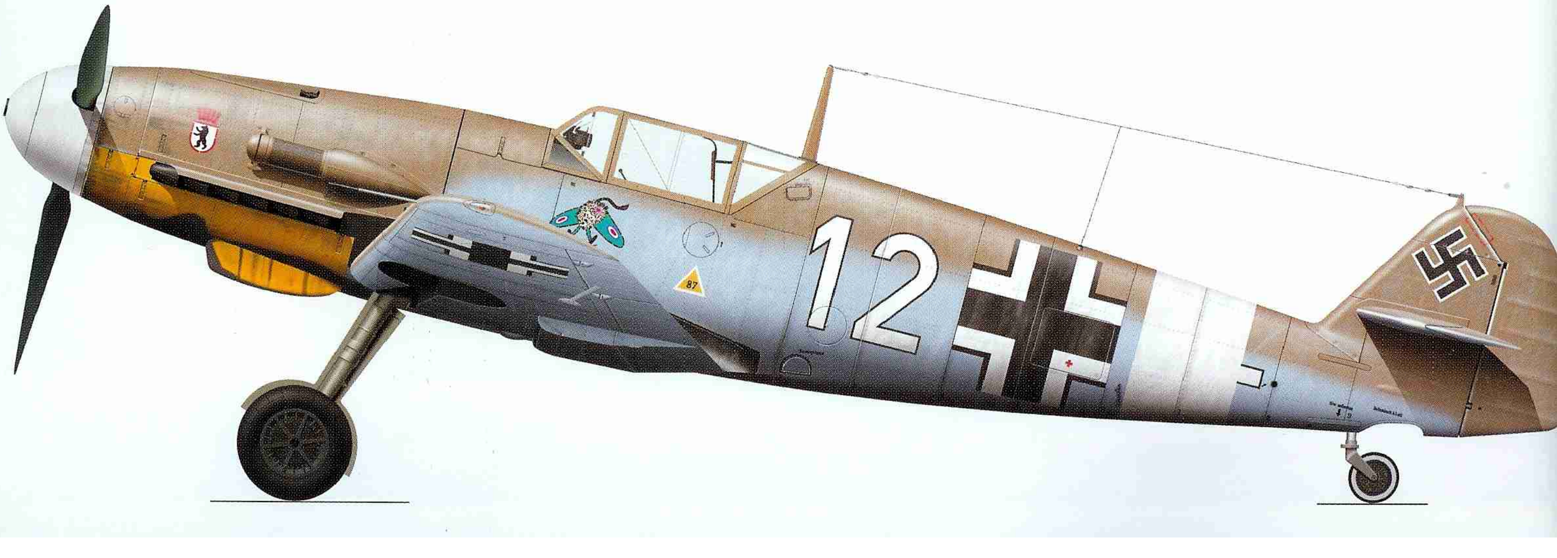
THIS PAGE: British troops examining a Bf 109 F-4 Trop, 'White 12' of 4./JG 27. This aircraft, believed to be W.Nr. 8438, was captured by the British at El Gazala in December 1941 and had the Staffel badge under the cockpit. The aircraft had been deliberately wrecked by demolition charges but examination of an original print shows that the oil leak from the oil cooler had been blown backwards by the slipstream. Thus it must have been present when the aircraft was flown and was not caused by the demolition charges. Note that leaking oil has spread over the already black-painted wing root.



4./JG 27 badge

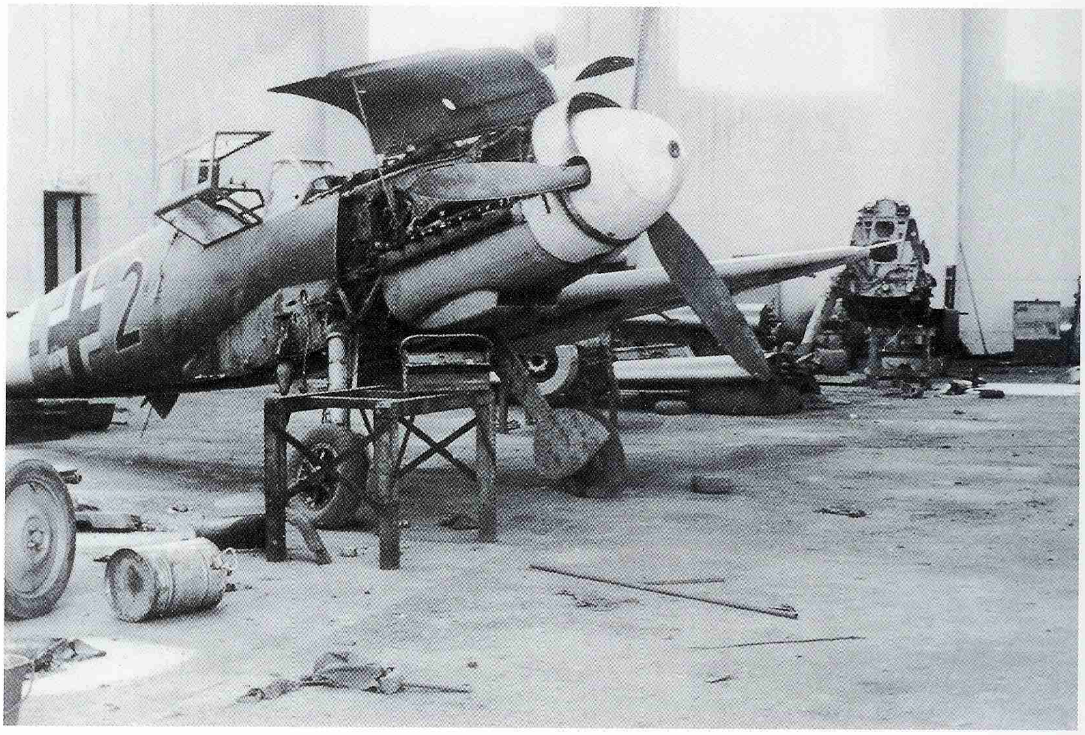
Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 Trop 'White 12' of 4./JG 27, El Gazala, late 1941

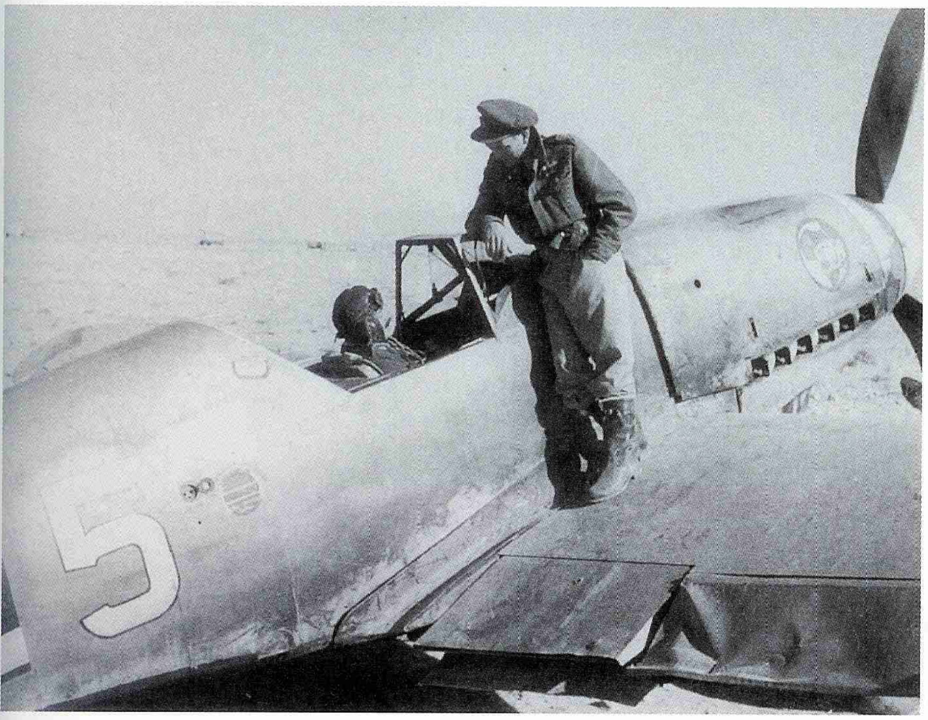
This aircraft was finished in a standard mid-demarcation 78/79 desert scheme and, except for the absence of a white band around the forward section of the nose, displays the usual white and yellow theatre markings. The badge of 4./JG 27 appeared under the cockpit and this aircraft had a faded, dusty, used appearance which was exaggerated by the oil leak which has caused heavy discolouration of the yellow area surrounding the oil cooler intake under the nose. Although not visible in the accompanying photographs, it is believed that this aircraft had a II. Gruppe bar, partially overpainted, on the rear fuselage.



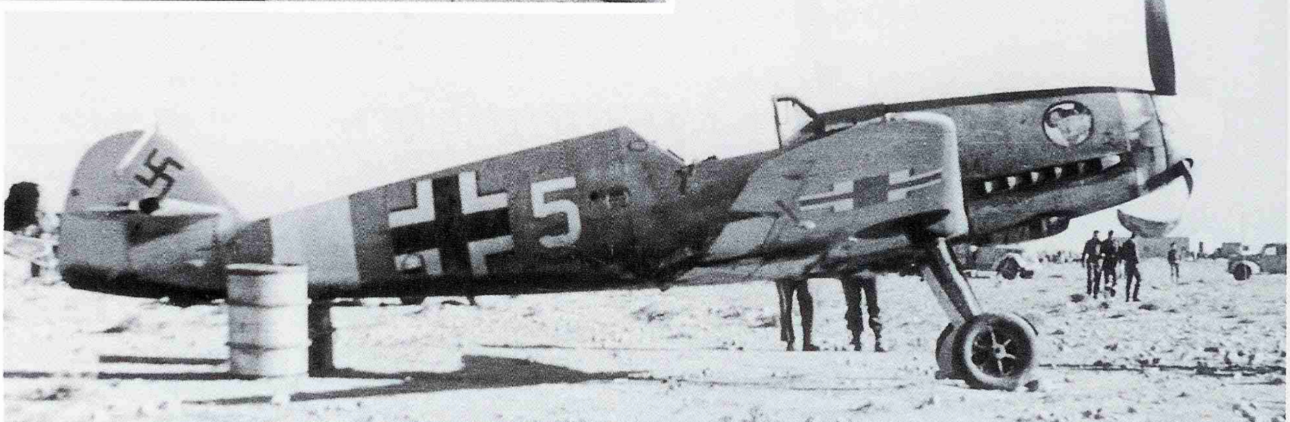
November 1941-January 1942

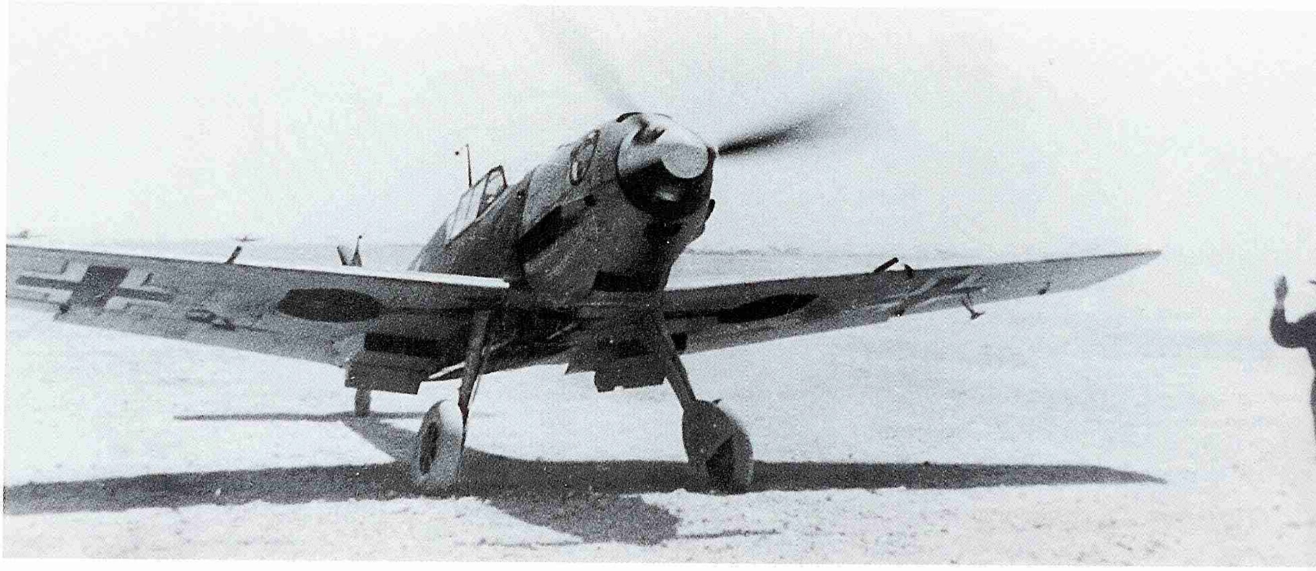
RIGHT: The 'Black 2' of 5./JG 27, shown after being captured in December 1941, possibly at Benina, during the British advance known as Operation 'Crusader' which cleared Axis forces from Cyrenaica and only halted when Rommel made a tactical withdrawal and established a defence at El Agheila.

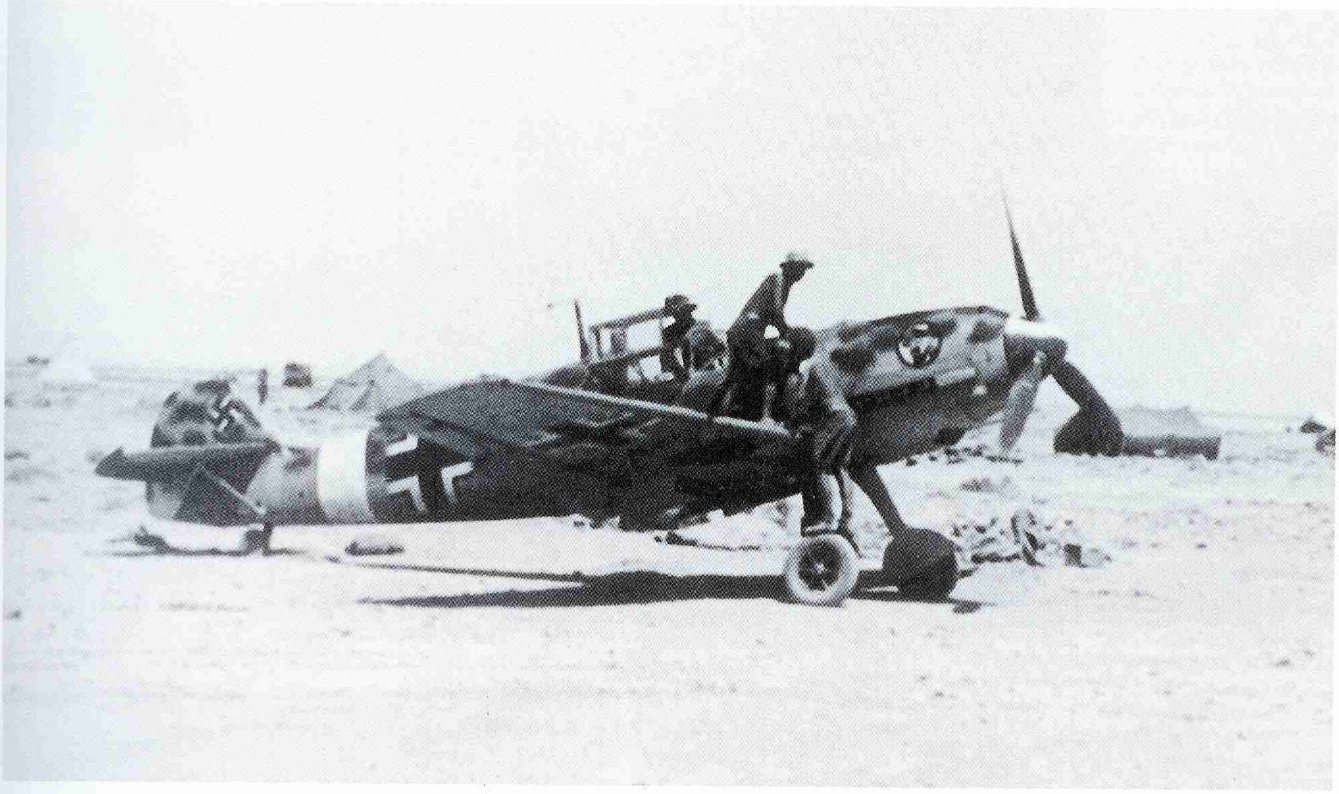


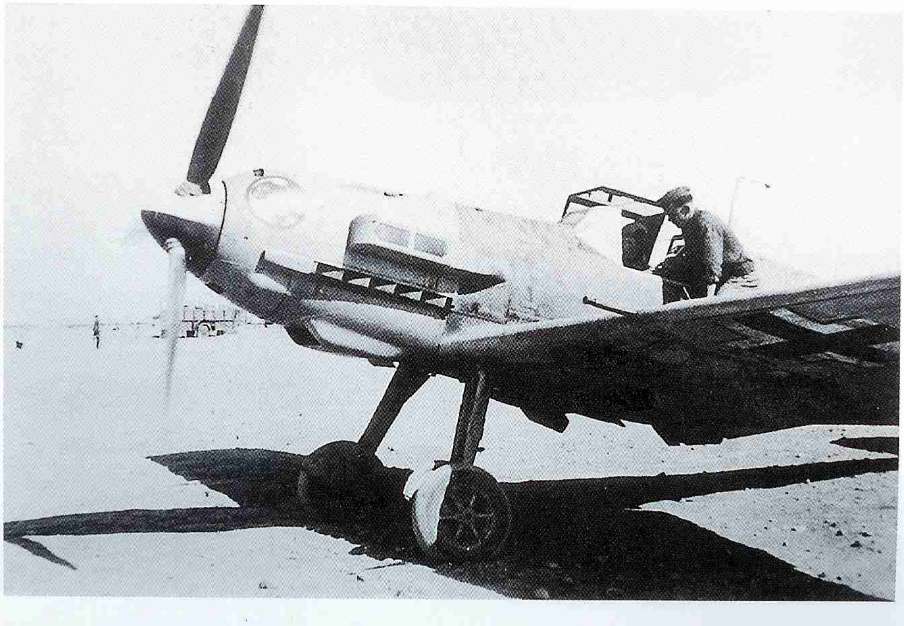


LEFT AND BELOW: Another Bf 109 F captured during 'Crusader' was this 'White 5' of 1./JG 27. The damage to the propeller blades suggests this machine made a forced landing and although the photographs are believed to have been taken at El Adem on 22 December 1941, the aircraft perhaps crashed elsewhere and was taken to El Adem later. The 78 Sandgelb camouflage on this aircraft, which extended right down the fuselage sides, appeared to have been thinly applied by brush and the original camouflage, particularly along the fuselage top decking, showed through as darker areas. The rudder was yellow and the white nose area immediately behind the spinner has been darkened by a coolant or oil leak.









Various views of Bf 109 E-7 Trop aircraft on desert airfields. As explained elsewhere, the sand scheme with green mottles is believed to have been applied in workshops in Sicily using stocks of Italian paints. It is interesting to note the variations in the spinner colouring applied to these aircraft. The aircraft (*TOP*) appears to have three-quarters of its spinner painted white. The spinner shown (*ABOVE*) has approximately a third painted white while that seen (*LEFT*) is half white and half black-green. The latter photo shows to advantage the box-like structure of the early sand filters.

Malta – The Luftwaffe Returns

> ***"To honour her brave people I award the George Cross to the Island Fortress of Malta to bear witness to a heroism and devotion that will long be famous in history.***
> ***George R.I."***
>
> *Citation from Buckingham Palace on the award of the George Cross to the people of Malta,*
> *15 April 1942*

Because of the growing threat posed to Axis supply lines by RAF aircraft based on Malta, it was decided in December 1941 to transfer *Luftflotte 2* from Central Russia to the Mediterranean area. The Air Fleet was commanded by one of the *Luftwaffe's* most able officers, *Generalfeldmarschall* Albert Kesselring who received the new title of *Oberbefehlshaber Süd* (Commander in Chief, South). Apart from X. *Fliegerkorps* and *Fliegerführer Afrika*, Kesselring's command was joined by II. *Fliegerkorps* under *General* Bruno Lörzer, which was to use bases in Sicily. Units under its control at this time included JG 53, the III. *Gruppe* of which, as mentioned above, had arrived in Sicily in late November 1941 but, because of the situation in North Africa, had first been temporarily diverted to that theatre. By 27 December the complete *Geschwader* had found its way to Sicily. At this time its strength was:

***Stab*/JG 53**	under *Major* Günther *Freiherr* von Maltzahn based at Comiso, equipped with six Bf 109 F-4s all of which were serviceable. The unit had five pilots, all combat ready.
I./JG 53	under *Major* Herbert Kaminski based at Gela, equipped with 40 Bf 109 F-4s of which 31 were serviceable. The unit had 40 pilots, of which 22 were combat ready, and the *Staffelkapitäne* were: *Oblt.* Hans-Joachim Heinecke (1./JG 53), *Hptm.* Ignaz Prestele (2./JG 53) and *Oblt.* Ulrich Wollschläger (3./JG 53).
II./JG 53	under *Hptm.* Walter Spies based at Comiso equipped with 39 Bf 109 F-4s of which 28 were serviceable. The unit had 42 pilots but only seven were combat ready. The *Staffelkapitäne* were: *Oblt.* Gerhard Michalski (4./JG 53), *Oblt.* Kurt Brändle (5./JG 53) and *Oblt.* Otto Böhner (6./JG 53).
III./JG 53	under *Major* Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke based at Catania, temporarily without equipment. Of its 35 pilots, none were reported combat ready. The *Staffelkapitäne* were: *Oblt.* Friedrich Below (7./JG 53), *Hptm.* Ernst-Günther Heinze (8./JG 53) and *Oblt.* Franz Götz (9./JG 53).

To increase the *Luftwaffe's* ability to carry out low-level attacks against airfields and other strongpoints, a new *Staffel* was added to the unit as 10.(*Jabo*)/JG 53 in February 1942. It was led by *Oblt.* Werner Langemann and equipped with Bf 109 F-4/B fighter bombers which could carry either one 250 kg (550 lb) or four 50 kg (110 lb) bombs.

The resumption of operations against the island began in mid-January 1942, an average of 65 sorties being flown daily, mainly by the bombers of KG 54, KG 77, KGr. 606 and KGr. 806, often escorted by the Bf 109s of JG 53. Against their Bf 109 Fs, the defending Hurricanes could do little. One solution was to introduce the Spitfire V to Malta, a fighter which could meet the *Friedrich* on equal terms. As S/Ldr. Stan Turner, who had arrived on the island in February to take over 249 Sqn. said: "Either we get Spitfire Vs on the island in days – not weeks – or we're done."

Not only did the Hurricanes possess an inferior performance to the Messerschmitt, they were often scrambled too late. Although there was radar on the island, it rarely had time to give adequate warning of the approach of the enemy. Also, Malta's Hurricane pilots still used either the outdated Vee formation or the line astern combat arrangement which, as their counterparts in Britain had already proved, rendered them extremely vulnerable to surprise attack. Turner was also able to change this tactic, quickly arranging for the RAF pilots to adopt the 'finger-four' formation which was now the norm in Britain and was similar to that first introduced by Werner Mölders in Spain. Despite improving tactics, Turner's first combat mission on 24 February was not very successful. After 249 Sqn. took off to intercept a group of Bf 109s, Turner and his wingman, P/O Don Telford, were intercepted by Bf 109s from *Stab*/JG 53 and the latter shot down by *Lt.* Franz Schiess. Turner himself managed to crash-land his damaged aircraft at Luqa.

ABOVE: In early February 1942, Oblt. Werner Langemann formed the 10.(Jabo) Staffel of JG 53 on Sicily. Drawing on pilots with previous fighter-bomber experience over England, the Staffel was to carry out low-level raids against pinpoint targets on Malta. The Jabo-Staffel flew its first mission on 8 February.

The German intention was now to eliminate Malta altogether as a base and an invasion of the island under the code name Operation *'Herkules'* was proposed. This involved the assembly of 1,500 aircraft (including 666 from the *Luftwaffe*), a large number of naval surface vessels mainly supplied by the Italians, 14 groups of submarines, five conventional Italian divisions and three parachute divisions including XI. *Fliegerkorps* under *General* Kurt Student. Although Hitler and Mussolini gave their support for the operation, it was strongly opposed by the Italian *General* Giacomo Carboni, mainly because he did not consider the proposed forces adequate for the operation. Much vacillation followed, and the plan was eventually abandoned.

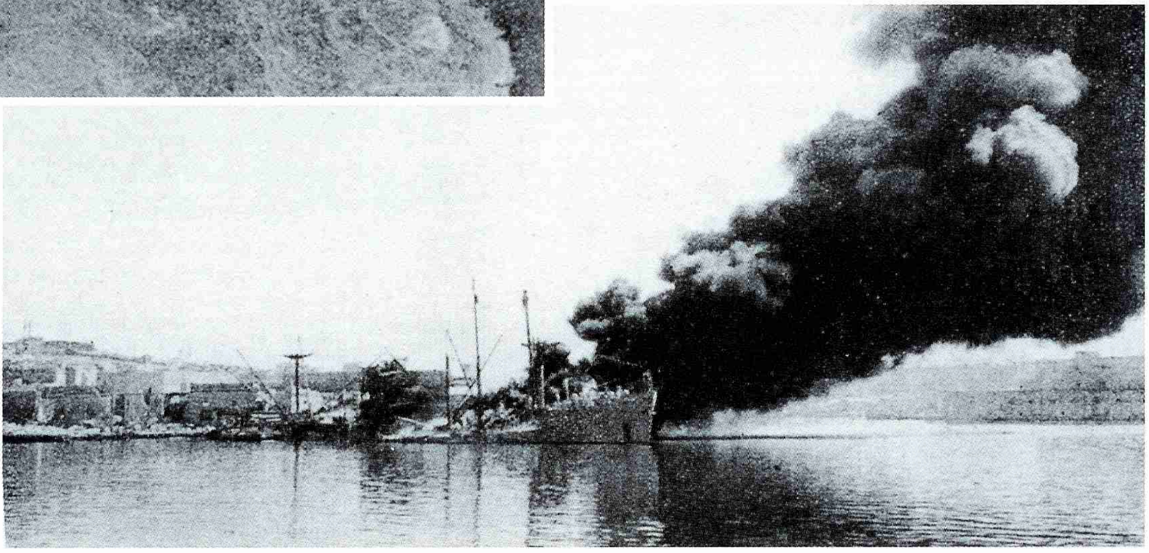
During the middle of February, yet another German fighter *Gruppe* joined the fight for Malta when II./JG 3, under *Hptm.* Karl-Heinz Krahl, equipped with the Bf 109 F-4, transferred to Sicily. Throughout the month the *Luftwaffe* continued to operate virtually at will over Malta, although the loss of the first Bf 109 F was recorded on 22 February. On this day, seven Hurricanes from 185 Sqn. were scrambled to intercept around 90 Ju 88s and Bf 109s targeting Malta's airfields Over Hal Far, Sgt. J.R. Sutherland attacked some Ju 88s as they pulled out of their dive and then managed to get a 'lucky shot' at a Bf 109 F-4 which was attempting to shoot down Sgt. Westcott. The wing came off the Messerschmitt, Yellow 10, W.Nr. 7541, piloted by *Uffz.* Walter Schwarz of 9./JG 53, and it crashed at Il Hotob near Qormi. Schwarz was killed. A second *Friedrich* was lost (the first from JG 3 in the area) on 3 March when *Uffz.* Benedikt Wegmann of the *5. Staffel* was hit by flak and crashed into the sea. Wegmann baled out from his F-4, Black 3, W.Nr. 8649, but was captured after swimming ashore. Next day, four Bf 109 F-4/B fighter-bombers from 10.(*Jabo*)/JG 53 swept in low to attack Ta'Qali but light flak guns shot down the aircraft piloted by *Oblt.* Hermann Raab who baled out and landed safely near Mosta. His aircraft, W.Nr. 7475, had previously suffered a crash landing at San Pietro in Sicily on 22 February.

The following days saw some slight change of fortune for the Maltese when 16 cannon-armed Spitfire VBs were delivered on 7 March, flying off the aircraft carrier HMS *Eagle*. Noting the arrival of the new fighters, the *Luftwaffe* then redoubled its offensive against Malta's airfields. One of the attacks, on Ta'Qali, was carried out by Ju 88s carrying rocket-assisted bombs designed to penetrate solid rock. *Luftwaffe* reconnaissance aircraft had been deceived into thinking that the British had built an underground hangar on the airfield, but although the RAF had attempted this, the rock had proved unsuitable. The use of these bombs therefore proved unnecessary, although the airfield was later temporarily put out of action. A respite came, however, when two supply convoys coming east via Gibraltar neared the island and the *Luftwaffe* switched its attentions to harbour installations. On 10 and 11 March, the first convoy was attacked by He 111s and Ju 88s followed by strikes against the second between the 21st and 24th. Despite these attacks, 16 more Spitfires were delivered, but the new fighters were still not available in sufficient numbers to have much effect on the *Luftwaffe* raids. However, towards the end of the month they were successful in shooting down a substantial number of the new Ju 87 Ds which had just entered service with III./St.G 3.

Despite these losses, the *Luftwaffe* continued to pound Malta. In the 31 days of March, 4,927 bomber sorties were flown against the island, and in April no less than 9,599 sorties resulted in the dropping of 6,700 tons of bombs. In Grand Harbour, three destroyers were sunk and HMS *Penelope* was so riddled with shrapnel that the crew renamed her '*Pepperpot*'. On 1 April, the RAF on Malta had only between 20-30 fighters to put up against 600 Axis aircraft. Nevertheless, the forces defending Malta did have some successes, although the advantage remained strongly with Axis forces. Also on the 1st of the month *Uffz.* Hans Pilz of 5./JG 3 was shot down by flak and taken prisoner while flying escort for about 70 Ju 87s and Ju 88s attacking Hal Far.

On 10 April, one of III./JG 53's more successful pilots, *Lt.* Hermann Neuhoff, was flying as part of a formation of 12 Bf 109s which were escorting 64 Ju 88s and 21 Ju 87s in an attack on Grand Harbour and aerodromes. Neuhoff's aircraft was one of a flight of six aircraft from 7./JG 53 providing fighter cover to the bombers, and when over Malta he sighted a Hurricane below him and dived to attack, leaving his second *Rotte* to protect his rear. This, however, it failed to do and when diving on the Hurricane, Neuhoff was himself attacked, as he said later, by a Spitfire from behind. His machine caught fire and he baled out and was taken prisoner. Having flown more than 400 operational flights, Neuhoff was a pilot of some considerable experience and was a serious loss as he was the acting

LEFT: The grand air assault on Malta began on 20 March with an attempt to neutralise the air defences. This was followed by mass attacks on airfields and grounded aircraft before the main weight of the attack was directed against naval forces, dockyards and installations. By 12 April, all the docks had been damaged, electric power, light and telephones had been put out of action and only the underground dockyard workshops were still operating. Although Stukageschwader 3 was at this time in the process of converting to the Ju 87 D, it still possessed a number of Ju 87 R-2s, one of which is seen here over the island's north-east coast, having flown from its base in Sicily.



ABOVE: Because British forces were unable to protect Malta convoys from attack, by March 1942 the Commanders-in-Chief in the Mediterranean had serious doubts whether attempts to run more convoys to the island should continue. However, Malta was deemed of such importance as an air staging point and as a base from which to attack German transports to North Africa, that the most drastic steps were justified to retain it. London therefore ordered that the supply attempts were to continue, regardless of the risks to shipping. Once again a small convoy was assembled in Alexandria consisting of a supply ship and three fast freighters, one of which was the SS Pampas, loaded with arms and general supplies. The convoy sailed on 20 March 1942 with destroyers and cruisers forming a covering force and close escort. On 22 March, as soon as the convoy was beyond the range of British fighter cover, it was attacked by Italian torpedo-bombers and warships and Luftwaffe Ju 88s. As yet unharmed, the convoy dispersed as it approached Malta and each ship, with a destroyer escort, was ordered to make best speed for the island. On the morning of the 23rd, the ships were exposed for some hours to air attack before they could reach harbour. The supply ship was hit, disabled and later sank, and one freighter was also sunk. Although Pampas was hit by two bombs, they failed to explode and she, with the remaining freighter, the SS Talabot, sailed into their unloading berths. However, amid the numerous bombing attacks, the fate of the ships was inevitable and both were hit on the 26th. The Talabot was scuttled when fire threatened the remaining ammunition in her hold, and the Pampas also sank when most of her holds flooded. Thus none of the four supply ships which set out from Egypt had survived and, of the 26,000 tons of cargo carried, only 5,000 tons were unloaded. In this photograph, the SS Pampas lies partly submerged and beyond hope of salvage while dust and smoke drift over Grand Harbour.

Staffel leader and had a tally of 40 aircraft to his credit, 21 of them claimed during his service in Russia. At the time of his capture he had already been awarded the Iron Cross, First Class, and the German Cross in Gold and would later also receive the Knight's Cross. In fact, it now appears, as Neuhoff himself subsequently acknowledged, that he was shot down in error by another Bf 109.

Four days later, *Hptm.* Karl-Heinz Krahl, the *Kommandeur* of II./JG 53, was strafing a ground target when he was shot down and killed by anti-aircraft fire near Hal Far airfield. He was flying a Bf 109 F-4, W.Nr. 8784 marked with a double chevron. His place was taken by *Hptm.* Kurt Brändle.

By this time the island had become the most heavily bombed place in the war, and the steadfast heroism displayed by the Maltese under the onslaught was little short of miraculous. On 15 April, King George VI awarded the people of the island the George Cross, Britain's highest award for civilian bravery, the first and only time this medal was not awarded to an individual. This, however, was of little consolation to a population slipping towards starvation and which, according to *Luftwaffe* records, was subjected to a total of 11,819 sorties between 20 March and 28 April, of which 5,667 were flown by fighters.

"The probability of rescue is fading away..."

FELIX SAUER

On 16 May 1942, engine failure forced Uffz. Felix Sauer of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53 to land in the sea 65 km south of Pozzalo where he climbed into his dinghy to await rescue. This is his account of subsequent events:

First Day

The sea is empty. In the distance, Malta is visible on the skyline. I wonder, will anyone look for me? And then my comrades are back again, this time with two rescue aircraft and with plenty of protection. But dusk is setting in. My comrades fly past hardly ten metres above my head. To attract their attention I fire my whole supply of signal flares, but they fail to see me. For a while they fly back and forth, but when it begins to get dark they disappear to the north.

Night is falling. The sea is calm. I start to check on my supplies: three bars of caffeine chocolate - they will hardly be of any use as they make you thirsty - some Pervitin lozenges; an aluminum Leica film container full of sugar, but not a drop of drinking water! While checking my provisions, the breeze blows me towards the coast. At the same time I am able to observe a night bombing attack on Malta.

Later, I notice two small boats approaching and searching the waves with the beams from their searchlights. Apparently the British are looking for me, but I trust my comrades. Best to risk waiting for them to find me.

Second Day

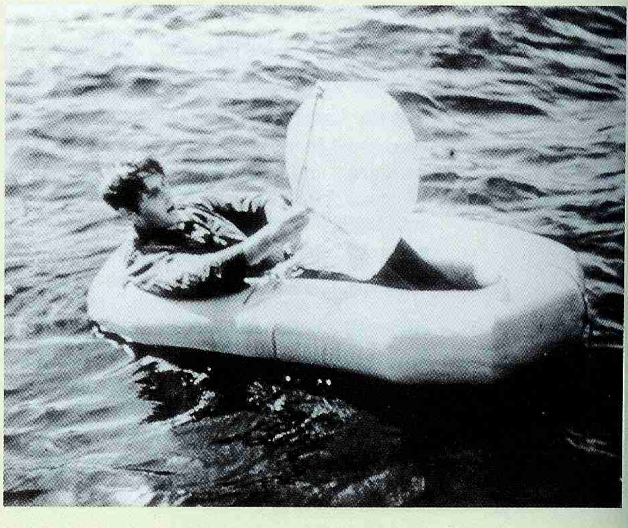
Morning dawns. The sun has just risen when another rescue aircraft appears. It passes within 50 metres without discovering me. The breeze carries me south, but Malta remains in sight. I try to amuse myself by watching the duels between English and Axis fighters. It is a fascinating fight which lasts all day. At dusk I catch sight of the small island of Filfar. The breeze carries me away from Sicily and takes me to the south of Malta.

What's that over there? British motor torpedo boats. There is no choice left now... It would be better, to attract their attention. During the day I had discovered one left-over signal flare cartridge in the bottom of the dinghy. When the British approach to within five kilometers, I fire the signal, but they disappear towards Marsaxlokk Bay, leaving huge waves behind them. It is highly unlikely they have seen me, for they were in a great hurry.

And yet the British had seen me! One hour later - it is already night - two small boats turn up, searching the waves with their lights. They come very close and I shout at the top of my voice, again and again, but the boats depart without having found me.

I deliberate: my comrades have given me up and even the British cannot find me. Who will help me now? Certainly not the fly which buzzes around me all day long (most probably it will be asleep now, perched on one of my shoulders like a chicken in a coop), and my only other companion, a seagull. Only the breeze is of use to me now. At the moment it blows from the south. If it continues like that I might find myself west of Malta tomorrow, and near the shore. Then someone would surely see me.

I carry with me a yellow silk cloth fixed to a telescopic metal tube, extendable like a photographer's stand, which is supposed to help attract attention. However, I decide to put up the rod as a mast and use the cloth as a sail. I fix the mast with a strap to one foot, tie one side of the sail to the rod and hold the other in my hand. In this way I can stretch out fairly comfortably in the dinghy so that I can keep the mast up for as long as possible. Slowly the breeze carries me north again. Thank God, I do not feel very thirsty yet.



Uffz. Sauer in his rubber dinghy. Note the makeshift sail.

Third Day

At last another day dawns. Over there, those might be the mountains of Sicily. And that peak over there must be Mount Etna. I hope the breeze keeps up but, alas, it shifts and takes my tiny craft back south. Although the hope of reaching Sicily is gone, Africa is not so far away. I drop a scrap of paper into the water and watch it drift away to estimate its relative speed. Adding the probable speed of the waves I conclude - quite philosophically - that, given its speed, I might reach Libya in four days. Then, incredibly, the wind changes direction yet again. Now it is blowing from the west, so where will I land blown in this direction? Most probably in Crete. Excellent!!! I will now try to reach Crete. It is a long way off, but perhaps in seven days...

Fourth Day

Slowly the dreaded thirst is setting in, the kind of thirst you cannot resist. The sea has been calm during the night and in the morning I find that a little moisture has condensed in the dinghy. Dew; many tiny drops. With a bit of gauze I collect these tiny traces of the precious water and manage to quench my tormenting thirst. I will be able to manage till tomorrow.

Fifth Day

Next morning came the big disappointment. The waves have kept the boat moving during the night and there is not a trace of dew. Never mind, there will be something else. I have an idea which might work. I remember that in desalination, twigs are used to facilitate the condensation of salt. I might help myself in a similar way. Instead of twigs I take a bit of gauze, fill the shell case of a signal flare with sea-water, put the gauze on top and expose the shell case to the sunlight. I hope that as the water evaporates, it will be caught in the gauze and may be drinkable, but after two trials I have to admit that this is not a success. The salt has condensed, but the water tastes as bitter as before.

And what if I drink the salt water? Actually, the main thing is to avoid the salty taste in the mouth for it produces the feeling of thirst. The sugar! It might serve as an antidote. In the morning I swallow three shell cases of sea-water with some sugar, that's the magic formula. I feel I may be able to manage like this.

Sixth and Seventh Day

On and on I drift - eastwards - in absolute solitude. In the distance, four Spitfires fly past and then six German transport aircraft. Those are the only things I see. As the hours pass, I realise that I am losing my strength. The probability of rescue is fading, but I am still hopeful. Although my comrades have certainly given up the search, the British won't come back and while the sea is not a road where a Good Samaritan passes every day, there is still the Almighty who knows everything and therefore knows of the airman in his tiny dinghy.

On the back of my wife's photograph I start my last letter to her, continuing it on a scrap of cardboard and then on a bit of paper I dig from my pocket. The rather shaky pencilled marks express my last thoughts which I hope will one day be read by my wife, even though they may be affected by the salty waves:

"Dearest, Unless a miracle occurs, I know I am going to die. Die of thirst and hunger alone in the wide ocean. But I do not believe that God will abandon he who fights for his home, his country and for a just cause, and this faith gives me strength. I shall be able to hold out for another three days. You must not think that I am writing this way because I am already losing my mind. No, I am fully conscious. You know me. I believe that at the end of the three days a miracle will happen. But if God wills otherwise, I will also be happy to die for my country.

You know, at night, I watch the same stars which are shining at home, and then I feel quite close to you.

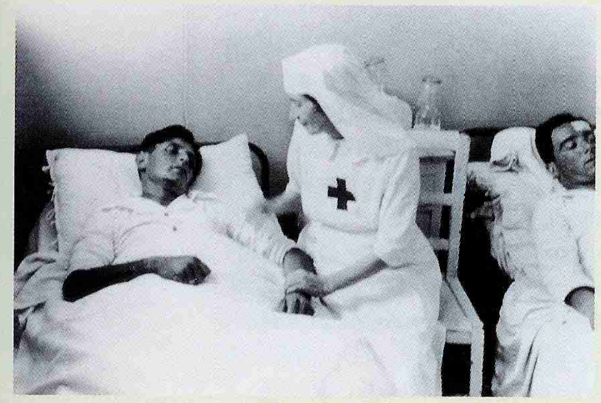
I may have only a short while left and yet my soul is still strong. And in the evening I pray to God, as you will do in our dear home."

Now and again I look up from my paper and see, still circling around me, the faithful fly and the white seagull, those two dear friends that have given me so much consolation.

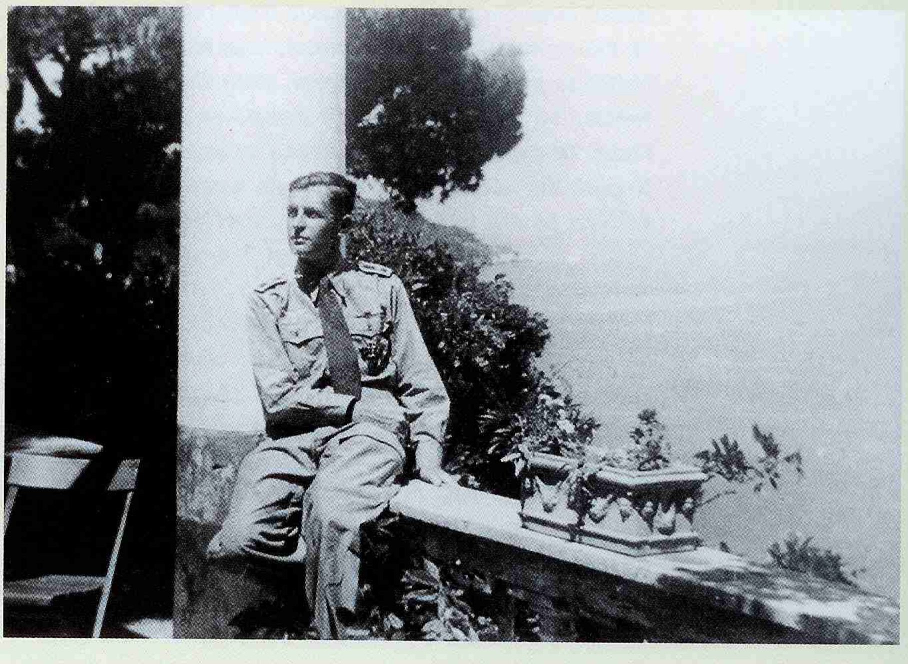
Eighth Day

Dawn of a new day. I know this is the last time I will see the sun. I may last long enough to see it set, but never again will I see it rise from the dark of the night to shed light and hope upon this earth. Not unless... But to the south there is something. It is not water or dolphins, nor clouds or a mirage. A mirage would not have such solid, geometrical outlines. A miracle! A large boat is coming straight towards me, as if obeying a secret command. This is something difficult to believe and yet I am not overwhelmed. In my heart of hearts, at the very root of my faith, I felt and knew that this must happen, and that sustained me With a last effort I raise the little sail so that they may see me more easily. But there is no need. On board the boat - the torpedo-boat *Turbine* - the alarm has been raised. Now I am able to recognize the flag: red-white-green. Italians! Hurrah!!

When I am taken aboard, helpless and hardly able to move, I burst into tears. But when I an taken ashore I am already a changed man, thanks to the kind and extremely devoted care of my Italian comrades, although I am still feeling weak and hardly able to stay on my feet.



ABOVE: While in hospital, recovering from his ordeal, Uffz. Sauer was presented with the Iron Cross, First Class, for his 90-plus flights over Malta.



RIGHT: Felix Sauer enjoying four weeks' convalescence leave in picturesque surroundings. Note the EK I pinned to his left breast pocket and the Frontflugspange, or War Flight Clasp, above the left pocket flap. Soon after returning to his unit, Sauer was posted back to Germany where he joined JG 104. Later commissioned, he remained with that unit until the end of the war.

On 20 April a reinforcement of 46 Spitfires was flown to Malta from the US aircraft carrier *Wasp*, but their arrival had been observed by II. *Fliegerkorps*. Almost immediately, Malta's airfields came under attack and within three days almost all the Spitfires had been either destroyed or damaged on the ground. In a second operation, Roosevelt allowed the *Wasp* to make another attempt to supply the island with a large number of new fighters. On 9 May, 64 Spitfires were flown off the *Wasp* and the Royal Navy carrier HMS *Eagle*, 62 fighters arriving safely. Although they landed in the middle of a raid, the ground crews were well prepared to receive them and within 35 minutes of their arrival, some were in action against Ju 88s attempting to bomb them on the ground.

Accompanying *Wasp* and *Eagle* on this run to Malta was the fast minelayer HMS *Welshman* which was loaded with Bofors anti-aircraft ammunition, aircraft spares and ammunition. Soon after noon, a photo-reconnaissance aircraft flew over Grand Harbour at about 15,000 feet. Although a smoke screen was in operation it was not at that time sufficiently thick to obscure the *Welshman*, of which photographs were taken, and during the afternoon 20 Ju 87s and Ju 88s with Bf 109 escort attempted to prevent the *Welshman* from landing her supplies by bombing Grand Harbour. But now at last a glimmer of hope began to appear for the defenders as an impressive number of 37 Spitfires rose to intercept. They shared the destruction of nine Ju 87s, four Ju 88s and a Bf 109 for the loss of two of their number, both probably claimed by *Ofw.* Herbert Rollwage of 5./JG 53. Six Hurricanes and 20 Spitfires were scrambled against a second raid in the afternoon, but this time III./JG 53 damaged two of the Hurricanes.

During the evening, a raid by Italian Cant Z 1007 *bis* bombers escorted by C.202s was followed by 20 Ju 87s escorted by a large number of Bf 109s. Taking part in this raid was *Lt. Dr.* Heiner Jörg of 6./JG 53 who had earlier flown as escort for the reconnaissance aircraft which had photographed *Welshman*. According to his subsequent interrogation, Jörg was flying as one of a pair of Bf 109s which was escorting the bombers when he saw three Spitfires and dived to deliver a frontal attack while his wingman manoeuvred into an up-sun position. After firing one burst, Jörg's aircraft received what he thought was a long-distance shot in the glycol system. He intended then to fly as far away from Malta as possible, bale out and wait for a rescue Do 24, but his cockpit rapidly became red hot and he baled out. He came down in the sea and was picked up by a launch and taken prisoner. Jörg's aircraft was one of three Bf 109s lost in return for one Spitfire, the pilot of which bailed out, although three pilots from III./JG 53, *Lt.* Quaritsch, *Lt.* Müller and *Lt.* Schaller, each claimed a Spitfire on this day. Besides Jörg, two other pilots from the *Geschwader* were shot down. These were *Lt.* Herbert Langer of *Stab* II./JG 53 who was wounded north of Valetta, and *Uffz.* Gerhard Rittersbusch of 5./JG 53 reported missing. The success of the new British fighters was certainly not recognised by Kesselring, however, who later wrote:

> ***"Thanks to [the success of the raids on 10 May], our ascendancy at sea and in the air in the supply lanes from Italy to Africa was assured. It would have been easy to capture the island after the bombing assault. That this did not happen was a grave mistake on the part of the German-Italian Command. It is to the credit of the Luftwaffe that it restricted the battle to purely military targets. With the success of the attack the OKW considered the tension so far relaxed that it transferred the greater part of our air forces to the Eastern Front. Of course, sufficient forces were left in the Mediterranean to keep watch on Malta, to curb the activity of the enemy's sea transport and to protect our own communications, without having to call on the forces of AOC Africa.'***
>
> *The memoirs of Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring,*
> *referring to 10 May 1942*

While Kesselring is undoubtedly right to consider that the results of his assault had been good and the blockade efficient, the neutralisation of Malta was far from complete. In particular, it was proving impossible to prevent air reinforcements and the safe arrival of the Spitfires was compounded by the transfer of both II./JG 3 and I./JG 53 back to Russia where they were to take part in the Summer offensive. The following Order of Battle includes the strength and serviceability figures for JG 53 at Comiso on 10 May 1942.

After the intensive operations of 10 May, there was a considerable reduction in activity next day. During an action over Gozo however, the *Kommodore* of JG 53, *Major* von Maltzahn, was shot down but managed to parachute into the sea and take to his dinghy. He was later rescued by Axis naval units, and flown back to Comiso in a Fieseler *Storch*.

Order of Battle 10 May 1942

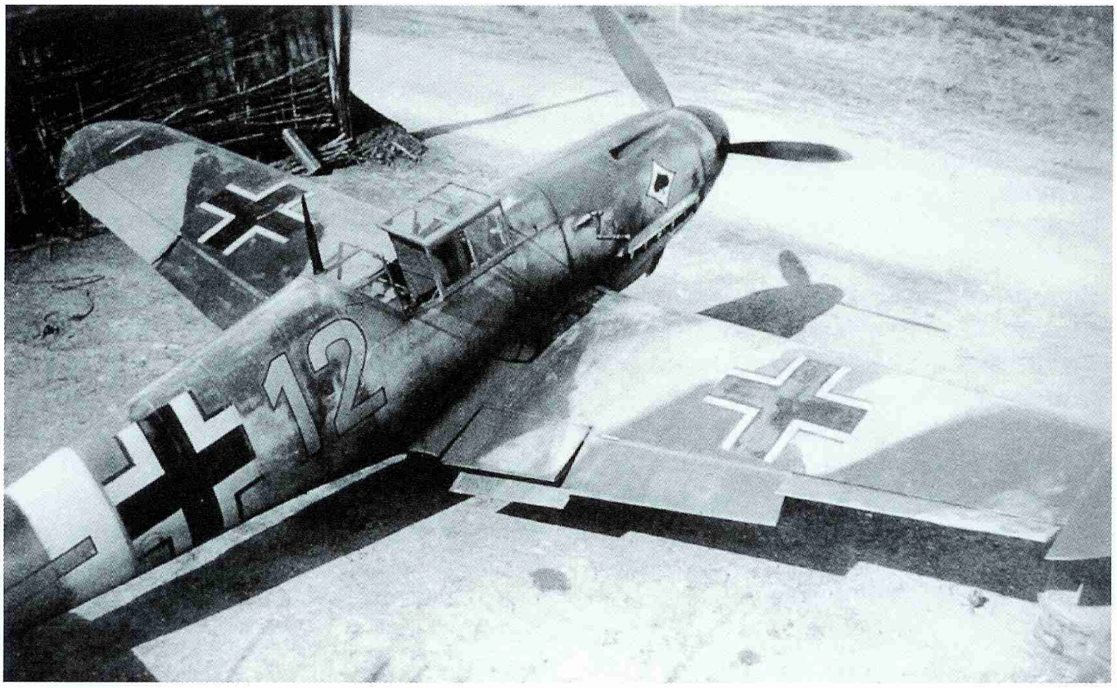
Luftflotte 2

			A/C on Strength	A/C Servicable
Luftflotte 2 HQ				
2.(*F*)/122	Ju 88	Trapani, Sicily	12	(6)
Koluft *Panzer* Armee Afrika				
4.(*H*)/12	Bf 109, Bf 110, Hs 126	Martuba, Libya	17	(7)
1.(*F*)/121	Ju 88, Bf 109	Derna, Libya	10	(9)
II.Fliegerkorps				
1.(*F*)/122	Ju 88, Bf 109	Catania, Sicily	14	(8)
Stab/JG 53	Bf 109	Comiso, Sicily	5	(3)
II./JG 53	Bf 109	Comiso, Sicily	42	(37)
III./JG 53	Bf 109	Comiso, Sicily	39	(25)
Jabo Staffel/JG 53	Bf 109	Comiso, Sicily	11	(6)
Stab III./ZG 26	Bf 110	Trapani, Sicily	16	(9)
8./ZG 26	Bf 110	Trapani, Sicily	7	(7)
10./ZG 26	Do 17	Trapani, Sicily	8	(6)
I./NJG 2	Ju 88	Catania, Sicily	20	(12)
KGr. 606	Ju 88	Catania, Sicily	23	(16)
KGr. 806	Ju 88	Catania, Sicily	28	(10)
Stab/KG 54	Ju 88	Comiso, Sicily	3	(3)
I./KG 54	Ju 88	Comiso, Sicily	26	(13)
III./St.G 3	Ju 87	San Pietro, Sicily	23	(10)
X.Fliegerkorps				
2.(*F*)/123	Ju 88	Kastelli, Crete	13	(6)
Stab/LG 1	Ju 88	Eleusis, Greece	1	(1)
I./LG 1	Ju 88	Iraklion, Crete	29	(16)
II./LG 1	Ju 88	Eleusis, Greece	31	(16)
II./KG 100	He 111	Kalamaki, Greece	25	(12)
Fliegerführer Afrika				
Stab/JG 27	Bf 109	Martuba, Libya	-	(-)
I./JG 27	Bf 109	Martuba, Libya	30	(23)
II./JG 27	Bf 109	Martuba, Libya	33	(27)
III./JG 27	Bf 109	Martuba, Libya	29	(15)
Jabo Staffel/JG 27	Bf 109	Martuba, Libya	8	(8)
2./NJG 2	Ju 88	Derna, Libya	9	(5)
9./ZG 26	Bf 110	Maleme, Crete	11	(4)
7./ZG 26	Bf 110	Derna, Libya	12	(5)
12./LG 1	Ju 88	Barce, Libya	11	(11)
Stab/St.G 3	Bf 110, He 111	Derna Süd, Libya	2	(0)
I./St.G 3	Ju 87	Derna Süd, Libya	41	(23)
V.Fliegerkorps				
2./SAG 125	Ar 196	Skaramanka, Crete	8	(4)
Stab/SAG 126	Bv 138	Skaramanka, Crete	1	(1)
1./SAG 126	He 60	Skaramanka, Crete	15	(11)
2./SAG 126	Ar 196, He 60	Karalla, Greece	15	(14)
3./SAG 126	Ar 196	Skaramanka, Crete	16	(10)

(Total strength was 536 aircraft, 374 of which were serviceable)

On 17 May, a further 17 Spitfires were flown off HMS *Eagle* and arrived safely in Malta. Three days later, III./JG 53 transferred to North Africa, leaving II./JG 53 as the only *Luftwaffe* fighter *Gruppe* remaining in Sicily. Command of this *Gruppe* passed to *Oblt.* Gerhard Michalski on 1 June. The departure of the German units provided Malta with another opportunity to reorganise its defences. On 3 June, another 27 Spitfires arrived on the island, again flown off HMS *Eagle.* By now there were sufficient fighters on Malta to deal with the relatively small numbers of *Regia Aeronautica* attacks, and the Spitfire V was more than a match for the best Italian fighters.

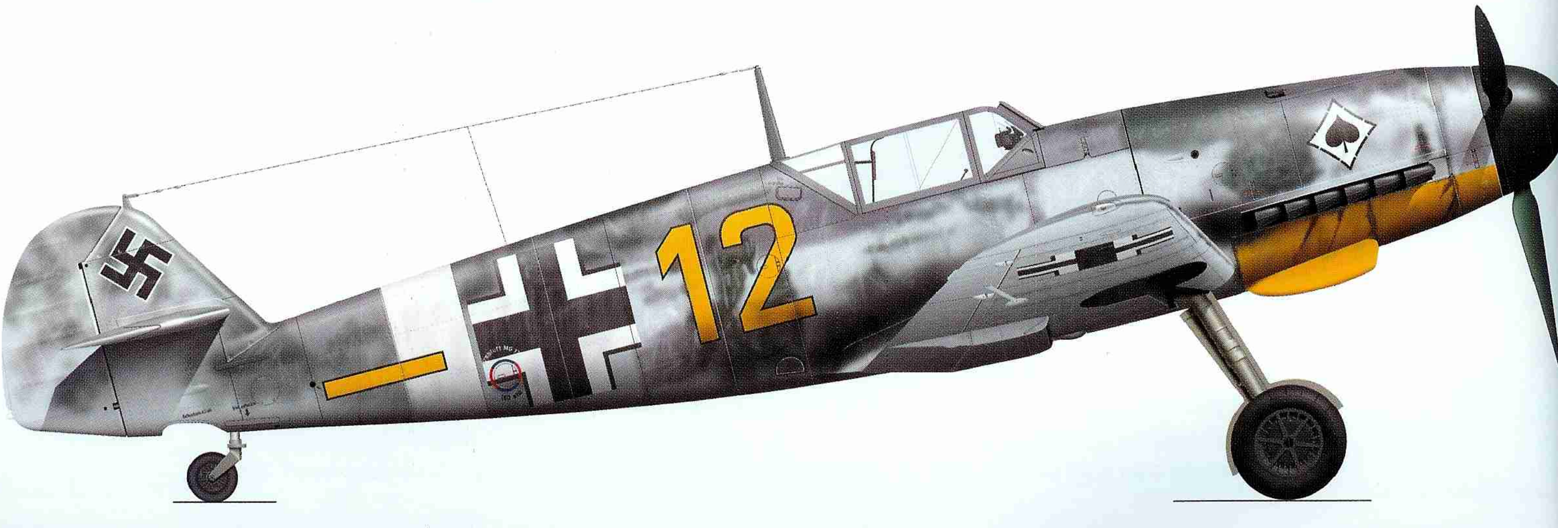
During the next few days, Spitfire pilots claimed the destruction of two Z.1007s, one Ju 88, two Bf 109 Fs, two C.202s and two Re.2001s for just one loss. But these successes were to prove just a lull before another storm. The possibility of the invasion of Malta being mounted led to II. *Fliegerkorps* being bolstered by the arrival of Ju 88s and a new Bf 109 unit, I./JG 77, from Russia. Months of hardship still lay ahead for, unless supplies continued to reach the island within a reasonable time, it would fall without the need for any further effort by the enemy.

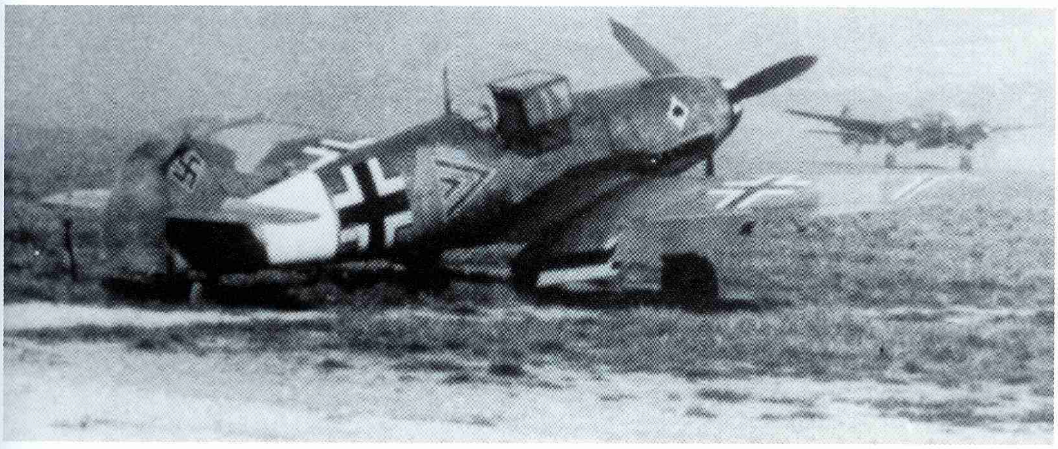


RIGHT: The Grey 74/75 splinter pattern applied to the wing uppersurfaces of this Bf 109 F-4, 'Yellow 12' of 6./JG 53, photographed at Comiso in Sicily in the Spring of 1942, conforms almost exactly to the pattern prescribed for the F and G series.

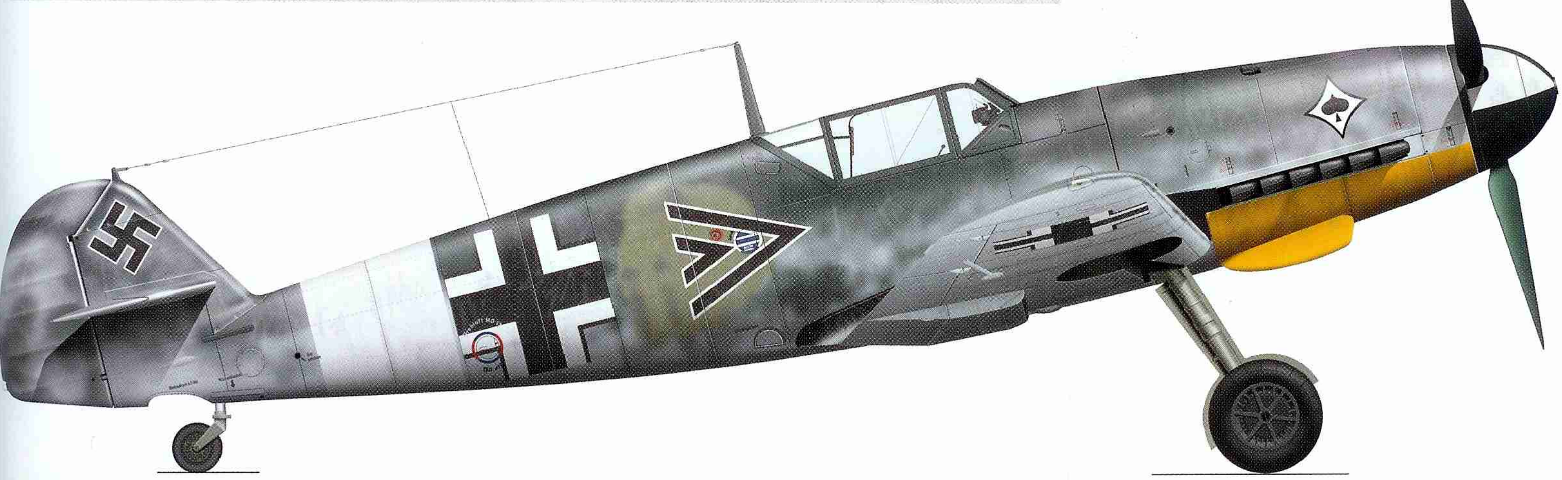
Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 'Yellow 12' of 6./JG 53, Sicily, Spring 1942

This aircraft was finished in the standard colours first introduced for fighters in July 1941 with undersurfaces in Grey 76 and the fuselage mottled predominantly with 74 and 75 with the subtle addition of 02. The uppersurfaces of the wings were finished in a 74/75 splinter pattern and the aircraft showed signs of some wear and tear as a result of operational use. There is also evidence of some repainting as the fuselage shows patches of newly-applied 74, particularly in the area of the fuselage number, possibly where an earlier identity has been changed, and on the engine cowling where the Geschwader badge has perhaps also been changed or repositioned.



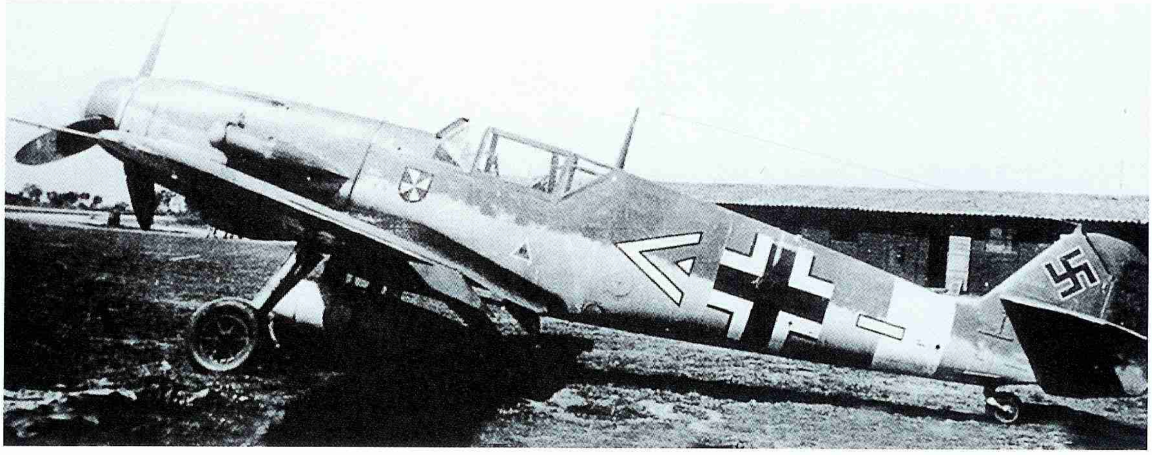


LEFT: The Bf 109 F-4 flown by Hptm. Herbert Kaminski, Kommandeur of I./JG 53 on Comiso airfield, early 1942. This Gruppe had previously been led by the well-known escaper, Franz von Werra, and Kaminski took over the Gruppe in November 1941 after von Werra was killed during a routine test flight in the Netherlands. Kaminski had previously led the Zerstörer Gruppe I./ZG 26 and received the Ritterkreuz on 6 August for his successes against ground targets in the campaigns in Crete and Russia, at which time he had also claimed five aerial victories. Some sources have speculated that the two pale stripes on the right wingtip may have been some form of special recognition marking, but they are more likely to be evidence of a recent repair.

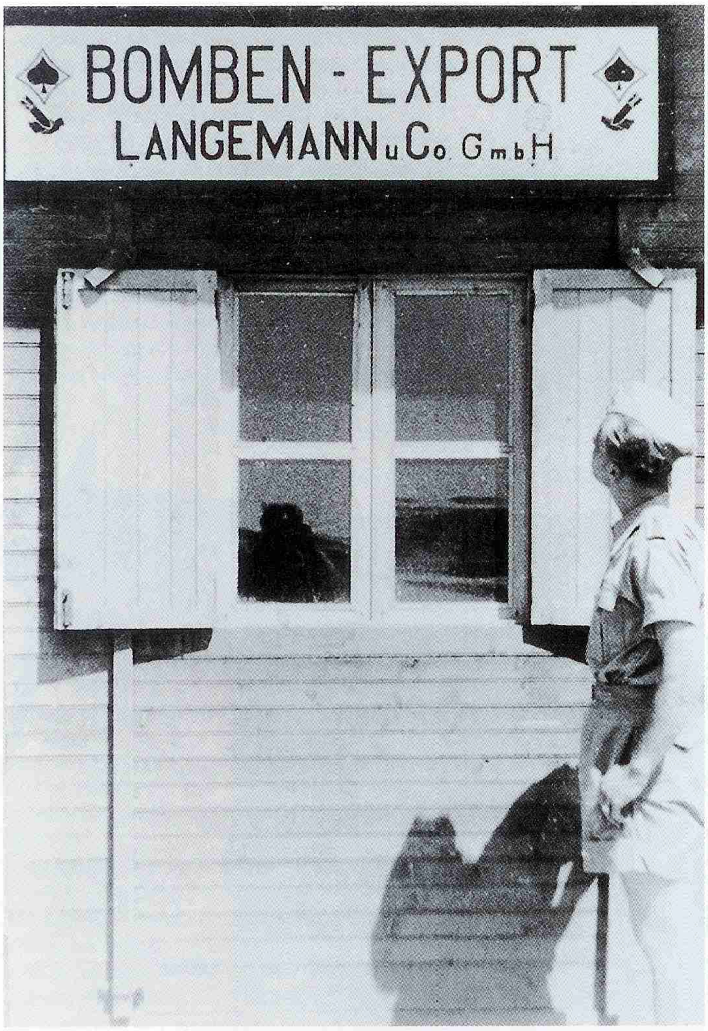


Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 flown by Hptm. Herbert Kaminski, Kommandeur of I./JG 53, Comiso, early 1942
Carrying the double chevron Stab marking of a Gruppenkommandeur, this aircraft was finished in a standard European camouflage scheme of 74/75 on the uppersurfaces with additional fuselage mottles in Grey 02. The spinner has a standard white segment and a wide white band was painted round the rear fuselage. None of Kaminski's victories was recorded on the rudder. The undersurfaces were finished in 76.

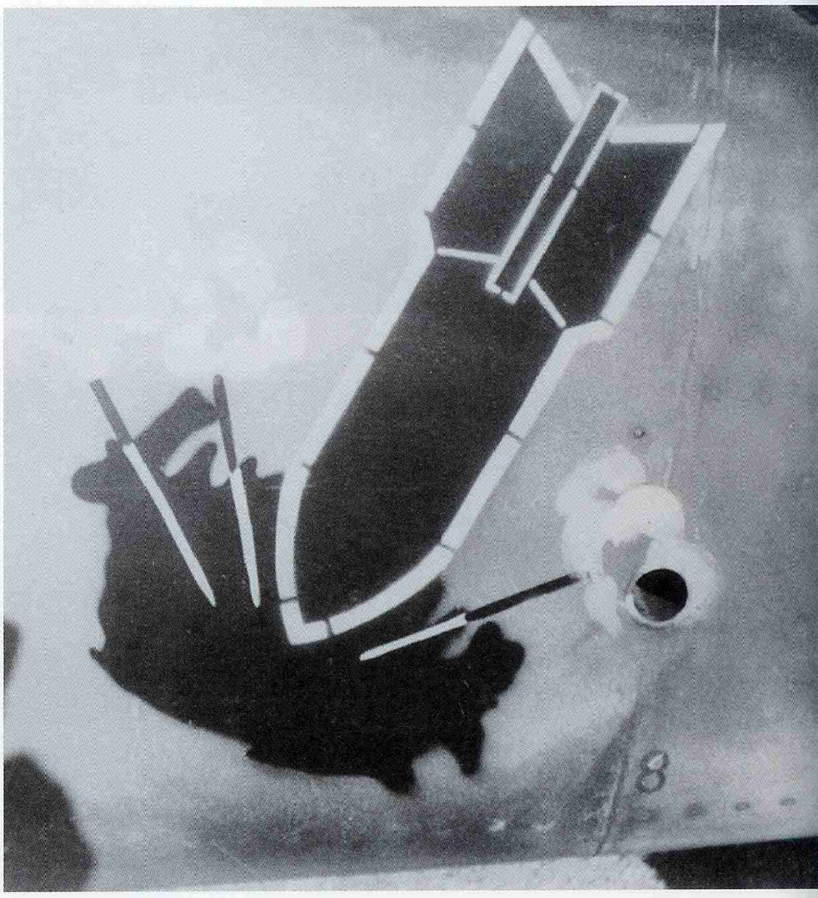
BELOW: The II./JG 3 served in Russia until November 1941when it was withdrawn to Wiesbaden-Erbenheim and re-equipped with Bf 109 F-4 Trop aircraft before transferring to the Mediterranean theatre in January 1942. The Gruppe was then under the command of Hptm. Karl-Heinz Krahl, the previous Gruppenkommandeur, Hptm. Gordon Gollob, having been assigned to the E-Stelle at Rechlin. This photograph shows Hptm. Krahl's Bf 109 F-4 in Sicily, from where the Gruppe flew operations against Malta, Krahl claiming a Spitfire as his 19th victory on 10 March 1942. Note that this photograph confirms that at least some of the aircraft from this Gruppe adopted the 78/79 camouflage scheme.



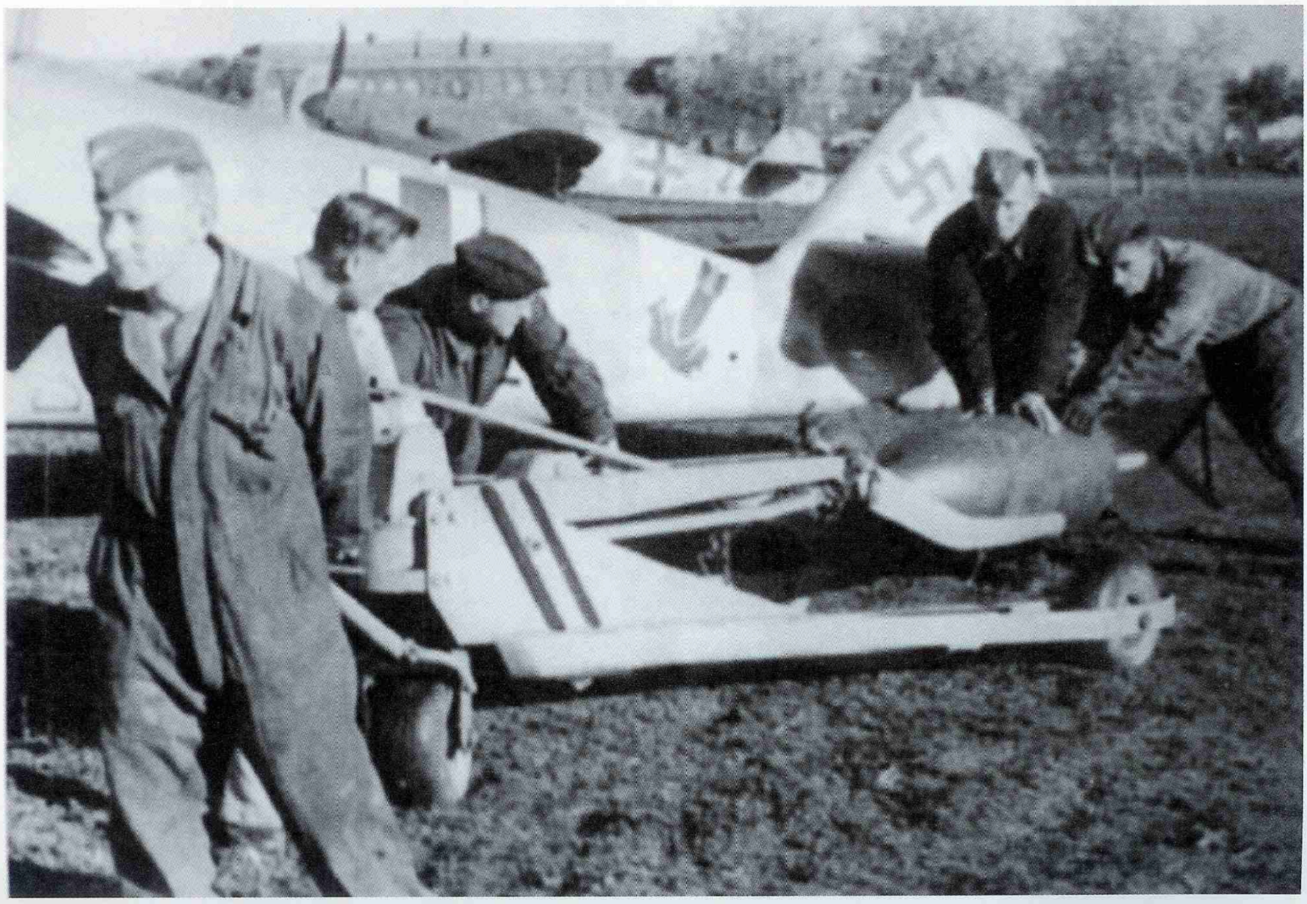
ABOVE LEFT: It is known that Joachim Kirschner joined II./JG 3 in late 1941 and flew with the Gruppe in Russia. Details of his first kill are uncertain, but on 26 March 1942, by which time II./JG 3 had moved to Sicily, he had claimed his second victory, a Spitfire. Kirschner was then a Leutnant with 5. Staffel and although II./JG 3 remained in the Mediterranean until April, he claimed no more victories until the Gruppe returned to Russia where his tally rapidly increased. He became Staffelkapitän of 5./JG 3 in September 1942 and by December had been awarded the Ritterkreuz for 51 victories. He is shown here as a Hauptmann after being awarded the Oak Leaves in August 1943 and claimed 188 victories before his death on 17 December 1943.



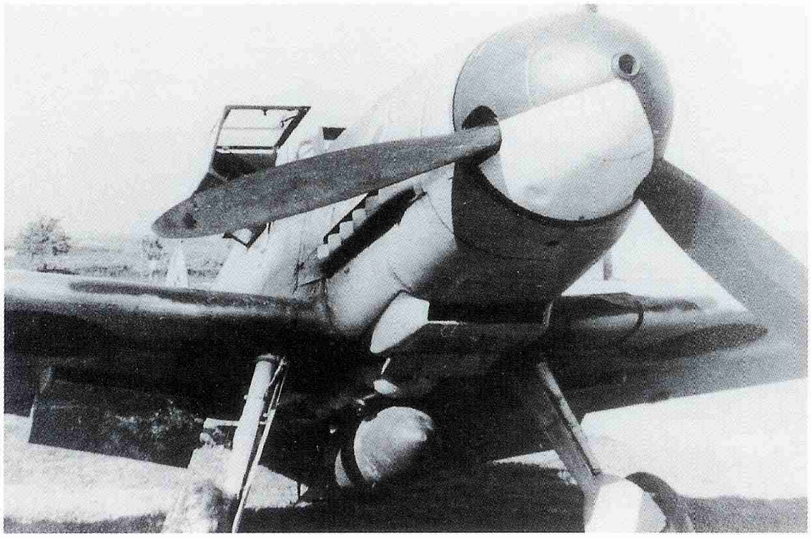
LEFT: The command post of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53, on Sicily. The signboard mounted above the window announces that this is the site of Langemann und Co GmbH, a bomb export company, named after the Staffelkapitän, Oblt. Werner Langemann.



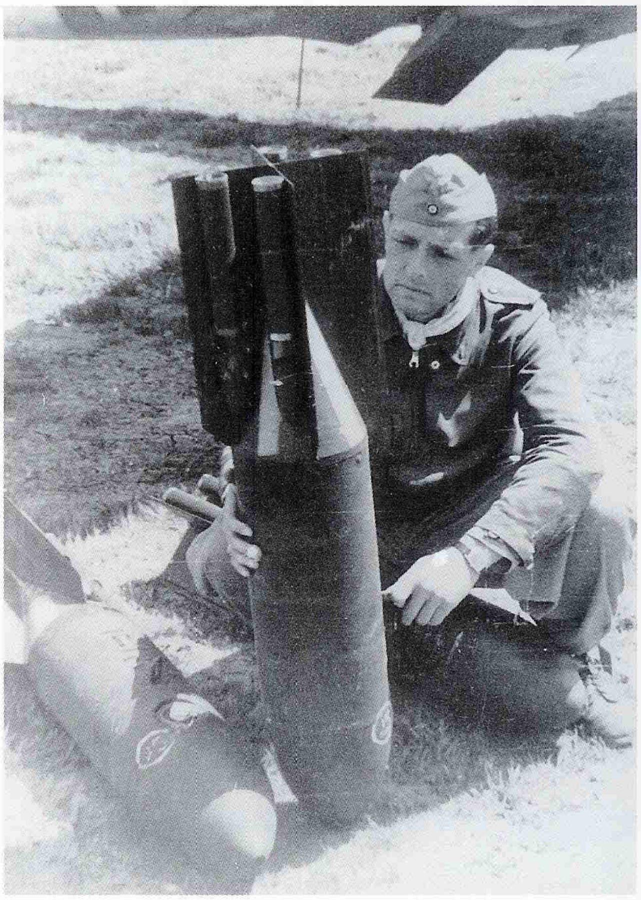
ABOVE: Excellent close-up view of the emblem of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53.



LEFT: Ground crew loading 'White 5' of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53 with a 250 kg bomb.

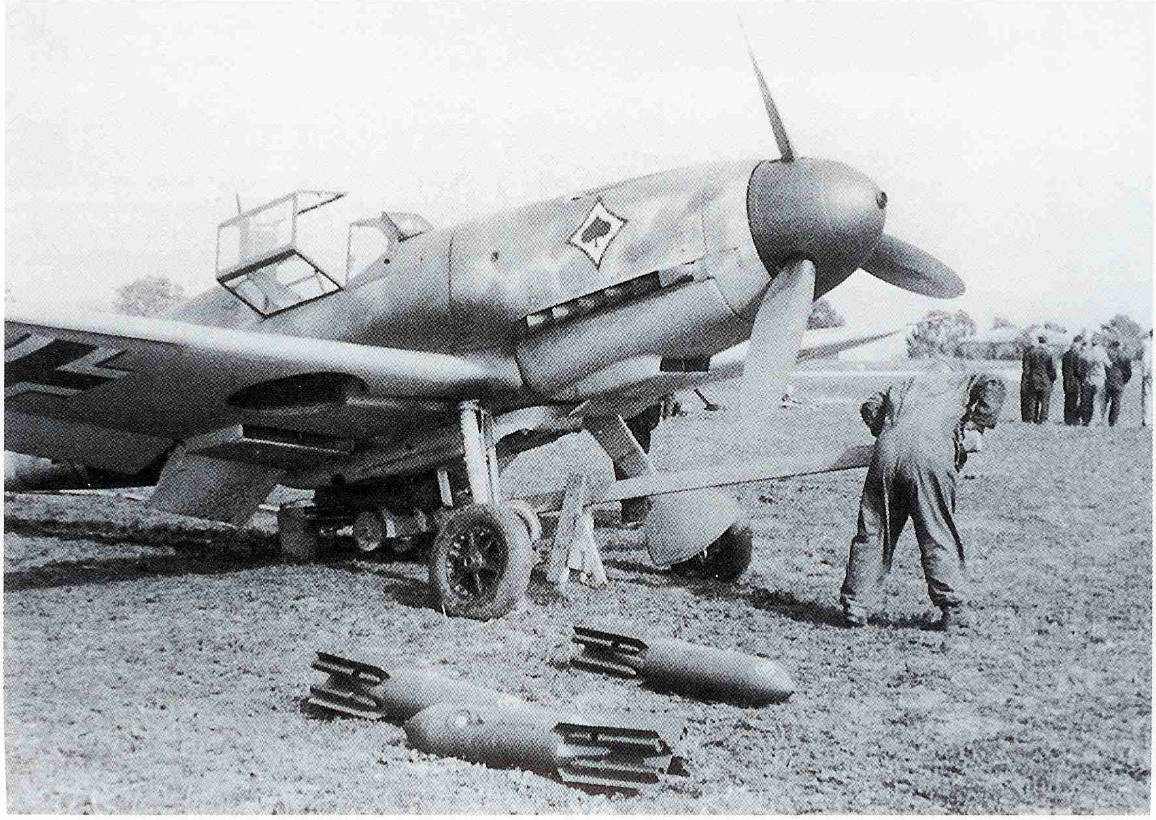


LEFT: A 250 kg bomb mounted on the fuselage rack of a Bf 109 F-4 of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53 based in Sicily.

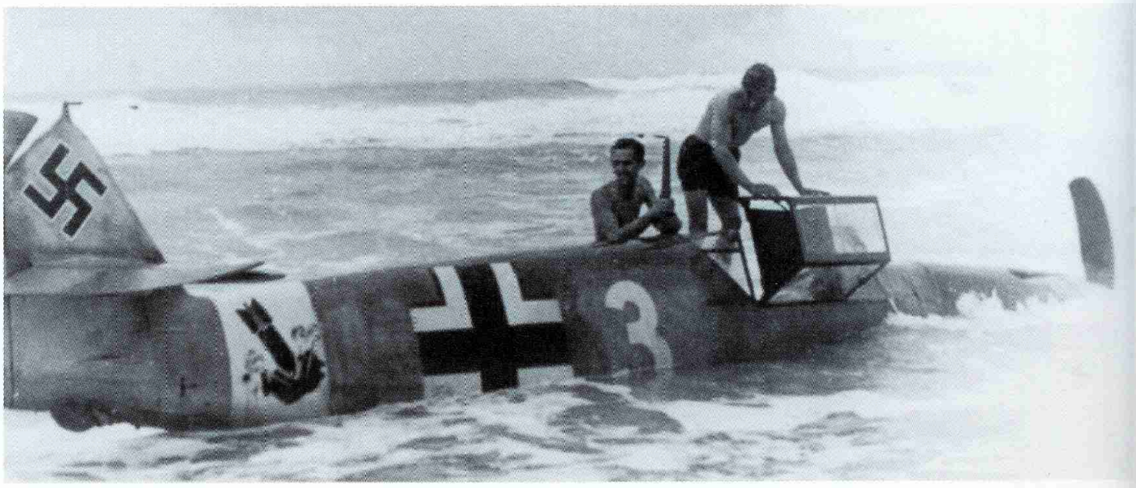


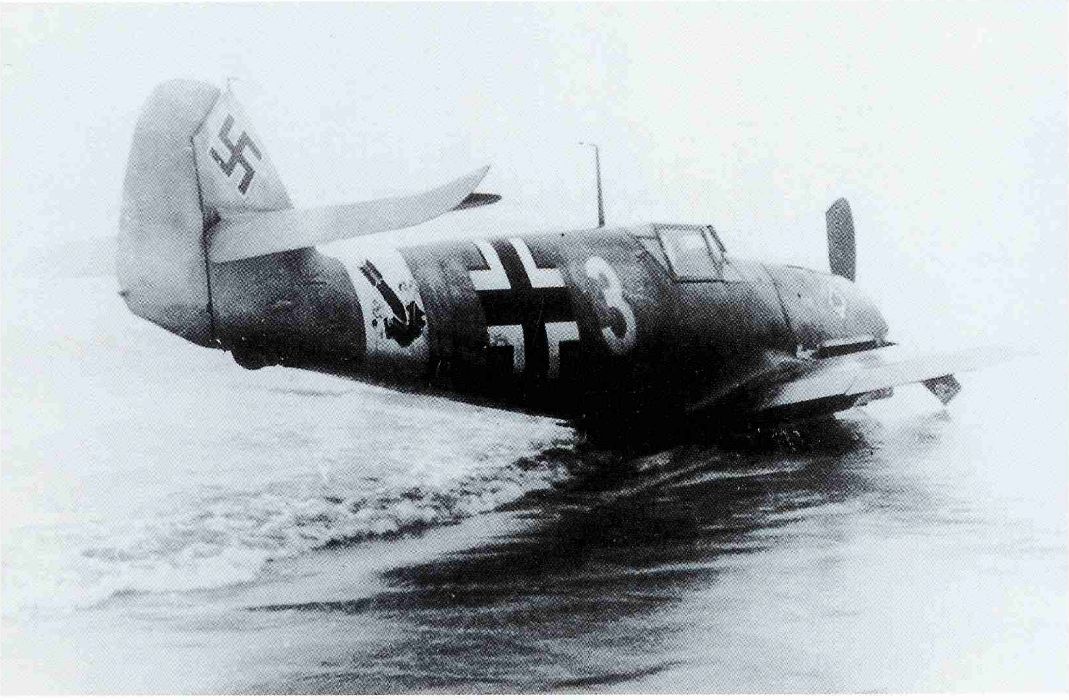
ABOVE: In a deliberate attempt to enhance the terror effect of falling bombs, cardboard whistles were sometimes attached to the tail fins, as seen in this view showing Uffz. Felix Sauer of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53 at Gela in April 1942.

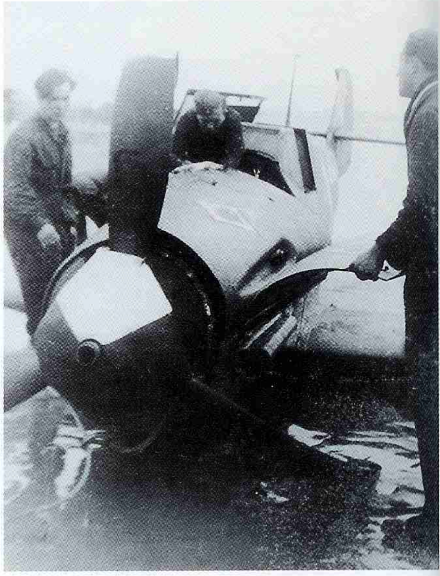
ABOVE AND RIGHT: Apart from the normal 250 kg bomb, the Bf 109 Fs of the Jabo Staffel of JG 53 could also carry an alternative load of four 50 kg bombs. *(RIGHT)* Ground staff at St. Pietro in March 1942 using a makeshift loading device to mount these weapons while *(ABOVE)* shows an aircraft at Gela in April still waiting to be loaded.

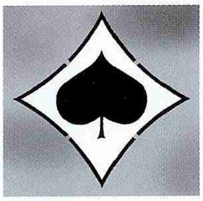


THIS PAGE: On 27 March 1942, Uffz. Felix Sauer of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53 experienced engine failure and forced landed his Bf 109 F-4, W. Nr. 7473, coded 'White 3' on the beach near Pozzallo. It was little damaged during the landing but was later declared a 90% loss, probably on account of the salt-water damage caused by the rising tide.

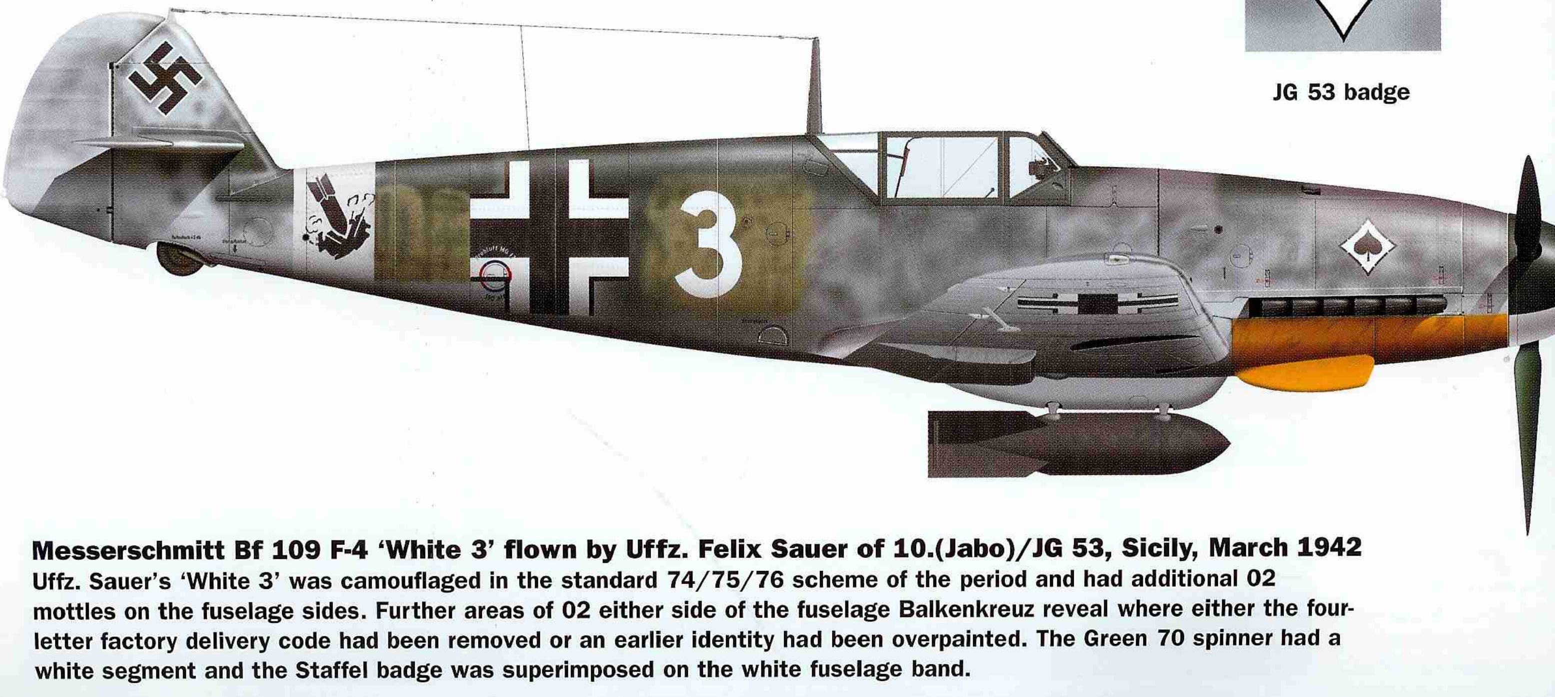








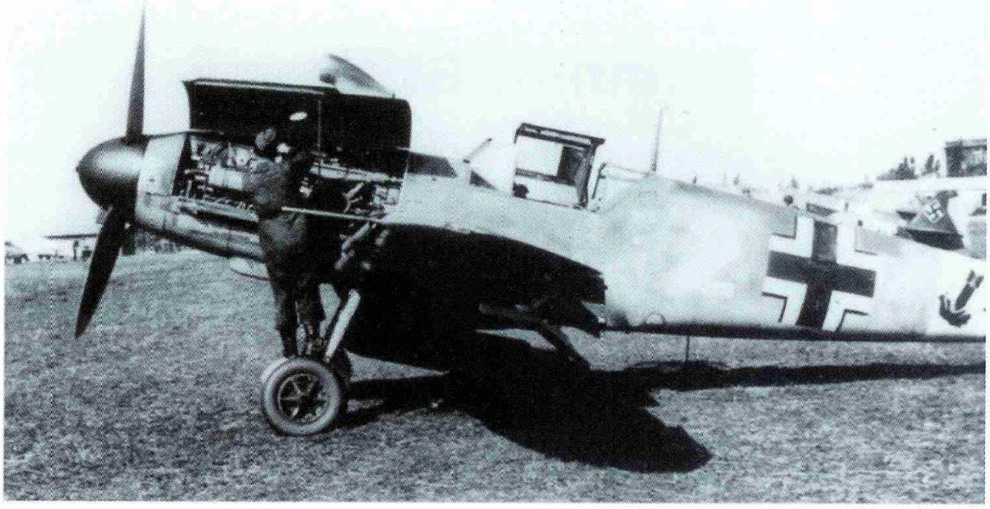
JG 53 badge

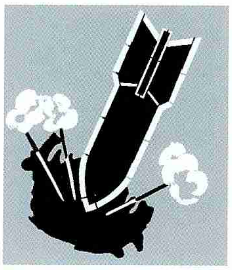


Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 'White 3' flown by Uffz. Felix Sauer of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53, Sicily, March 1942

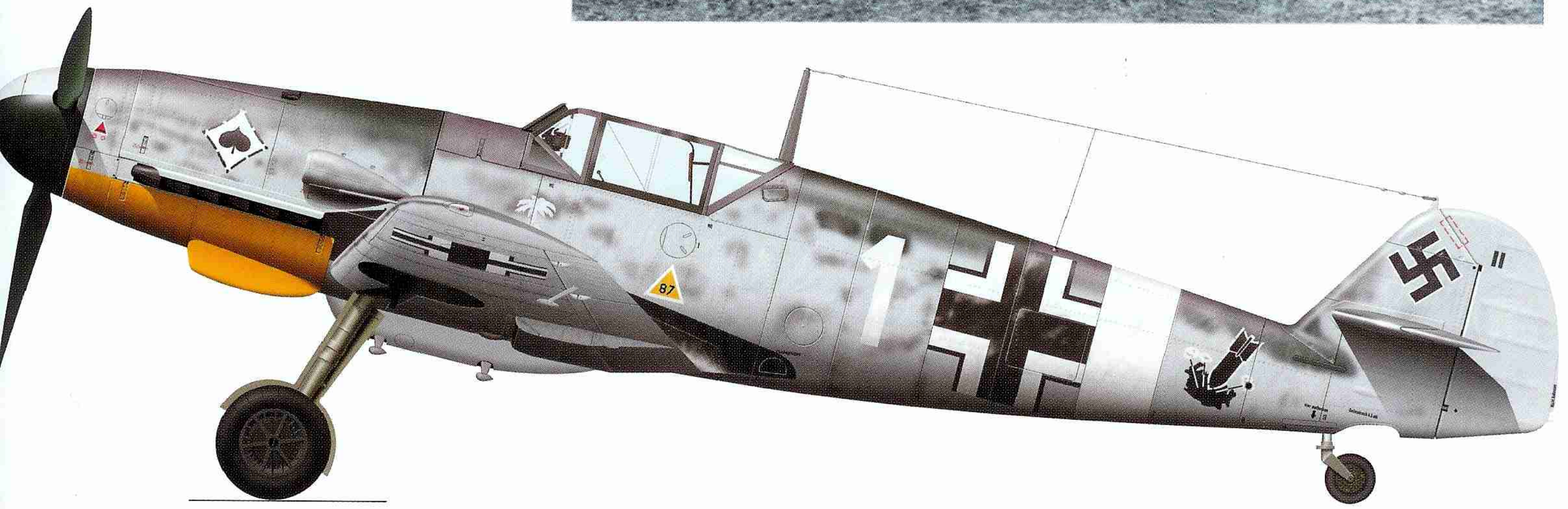
Uffz. Sauer's 'White 3' was camouflaged in the standard 74/75/76 scheme of the period and had additional 02 mottles on the fuselage sides. Further areas of 02 either side of the fuselage Balkenkreuz reveal where either the four-letter factory delivery code had been removed or an earlier identity had been overpainted. The Green 70 spinner had a white segment and the Staffel badge was superimposed on the white fuselage band.

RIGHT: Bf 109 F-4 'White 2', W.Nr. 7488, of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53 at Gela carrying a 250 kg bomb. This aircraft was lost while being flown by Ofw. Günther Fronhöfer on a mission to Malta on 4 April 1942.





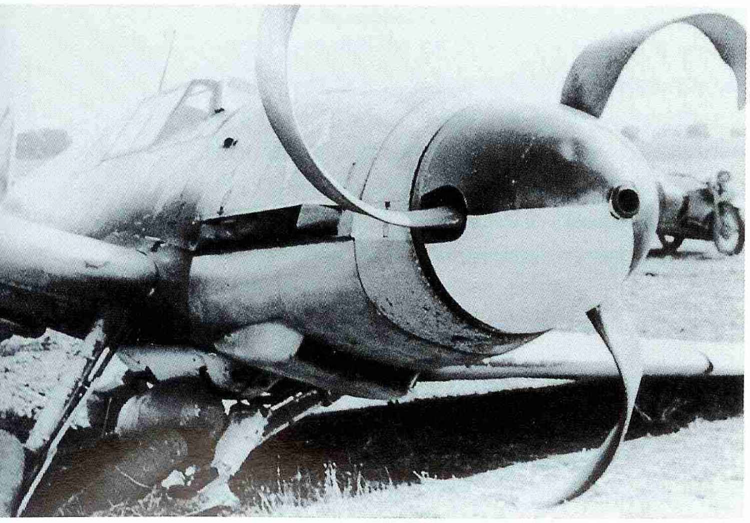
10.(Jabo)/JG 53 badge

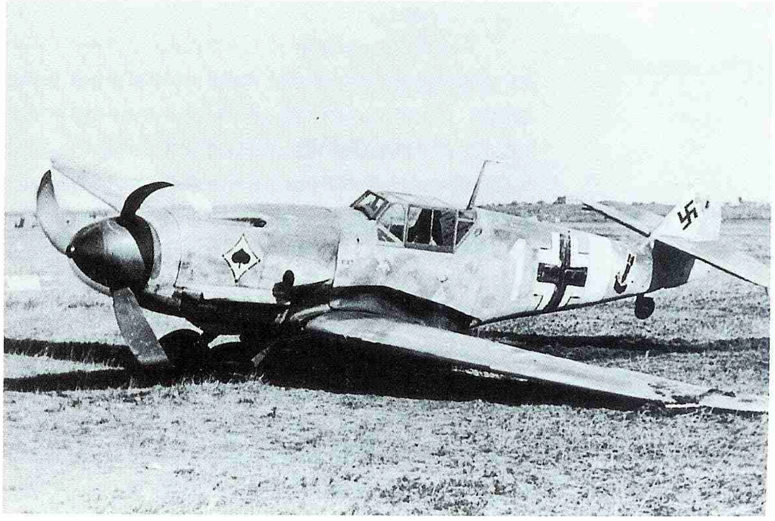


Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 'White 1' of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53, Sicily, 1942

'White 1' was finished in standard 74/75 and 76 camouflage colours applied in a splinter pattern of 74 and 75 on the wing uppersurfaces and a mottle of these colours over the Blue 76 fuselage sides. As the position of the white fuselage band is further forward than usual, the Staffel badge showing a bomb exploding on a silhouette of Malta appears on the camouflage finish. Unusual on this aircraft is the palm-tree and swastika emblem painted beneath the windscreen.

BELOW AND BELOW RIGHT: This Bf 109 F-4, 'White 1' of 10.(Jabo)/JG 53, was photographed after its port undercarriage leg collapsed while preparing to take off for a mission, trapping its 250 kg bomb beneath the fuselage. The identity of the pilot is not known but the rudder appears to be marked with two black victory bars. In addition to the 'Pik As' badge on the engine cowling, the Staffel badge appears on the rear fuselage. The Jabo Staffel was the only one to have a Staffel badge, but this aircraft carries an additional emblem under the windscreen which appears to be based upon the palm-tree and swastika design of the Afrika Korps *(RIGHT)* as shown painted on the front mudguard of a German lorry.





January-June 1942

Rommel Strikes

> ***'The co-operation between Panzerarmee and Fliegerführer Afrika was good. It was deepened and enhanced still further by frequent visits by Feldmarschall Kesselring, who attached particular importance to constant personal contact with the Panzerarmee. The Luftwaffe always supported Panzerarmee operations excellently, in spite of enemy air superiority, except when their operations had to be curtailed by supply difficulties.'***
>
> *Report by Panzerarmee Afrika,*
> *6 February 1942*

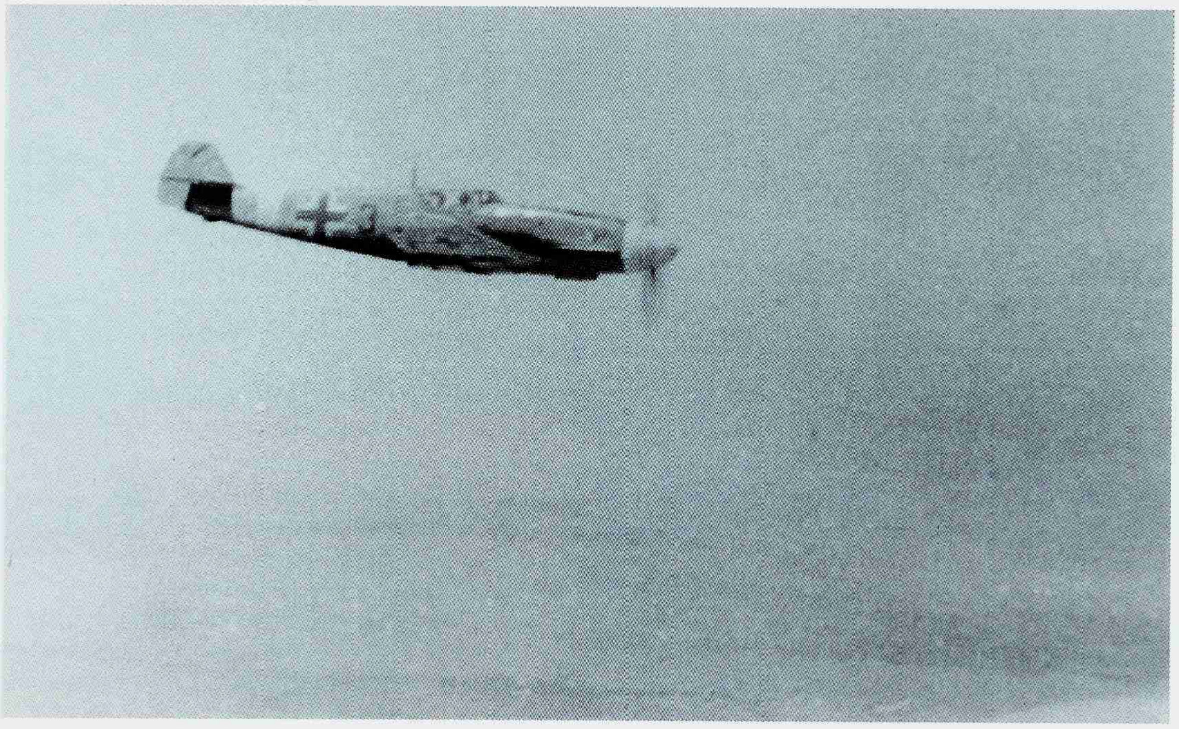
By the end of 1941, Auchinleck's offensive ground to a halt on the Marsa Brega line and in early 1942, two German and Italian garrisons at Halfaya and Bardia were forced to surrender after being cut off by the advance. Rommel lost nearly 14,000 men (4,000 of which were German), but despite this reverse, conditions were beginning to change in favour of Axis forces. The entry of Japan into the war had diverted British reinforcements away from North Africa to the Far East, and the Axis's own supply situation was improving. The dreadful Winter weather in the Soviet Union made flying operations impossible and allowed the *Luftwaffe* to transfer forces to Africa where they were able to secure Rommel's supply lines. This allowed him to receive replacements for the men and arms lost in the Winter battle, and, most importantly, he received new tanks.

Rommel was now able to contemplate further offensive action and, learning from his intelligence service of the weakness in the British line in front of El Agheila, he planned an attack. At this time, the *Luftwaffe's* single-engined fighter force in North Africa reported a very low serviceability rate:

***Stab*/JG 27**	*Major* Berhard Woldenga	3 Bf 109 F-4s	(2 serviceable)
I./JG 27	*Major* Eduard Neumann	23 Bf 109 F-4s	(6 serviceable)
1./JG 27	*Oblt.* Ludwig		
2./JG 27	*Oblt.* Friedrich Keller		
3./JG 27	*Oblt.* Gerhard Homuth		
II./JG 27	*Hptm.* Erich Gerlitz	25 Bf 109 F-4s	(7 serviceable)
4./JG 27	*Oblt.* Gustav Rödel		
5./JG 27	*Hptm.* Ernst Düllberg		
6./JG 27	*Oblt.* Rolf Stössner		
III./JG 27	*Hptm.* Erhard Braune	19 Bf 109 F-4s	(3 serviceable)
7./JG 27	*Oblt.* Hermann Tangerding		
8./JG 27	*Oblt.* Hans Lass		
9./JG 27	*Lt.* Klaus Faber		
10.(*Jabo*)/JG 53	*Oblt.* Werner Langemann	5 Bf 109 F-4/Bs	(4 serviceable)

Employing tactics reminiscent of the advance over the same ground a year before, the attack began on 21 January with Italian divisions being sent north to Benghazi while Rommel led the *Afrika Korps* inland. At first, this succeeded in forcing the British to retreat to a line running from Gazala southwards to the desert fort of Bir Hacheim, but by early February Rommel had reached the limit of his strength and as each side dug in, so began another period of stalemate which was to last until May. Meanwhile, on 25 January, II./JG 27 was involved in a major action when it intercepted a formation of RAF Blenheims escorted by Kittyhawks of 112 Sqn. north-east of Antelat. Four Kittyhawks were claimed destroyed, two by *Ofw.* Otto Schulz and one each by *Uffz.* Alfred Schulze and *Ogfr.* Otto Monska.

There was little aerial activity during the first week of February due to four days of heavy rain during which the *Luftwaffe* reported that its aircraft were unable to take off because they were up to their axles in wet sand. Operations resumed on 8 February with Marseille of 3./JG 27 claiming four RAF fighters, *Ofw.* Otto Schulz of II./JG 27 claiming two and one each claimed by *Oblt.* Homuth, *Oblt.* Keller and *Lt.* Friedrich Körner, all from I. *Gruppe.* With this operation, Marseille became the highest scoring



LEFT: A Bf 109 F of I./JG 27 in flight over the Martuba area, 1942.

fighter pilot in the theatre with 40 victories, one more than Homuth. A week later, *Ofw.* Schulz took off alone and claimed the destruction of five Kittyhawks from 94 and 112 Sqns. In fact, four RAF aircraft were lost as the fifth succeeded in limping home.

A less successful *Luftwaffe* pilot at this time was *Lt.* Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt of 2./JG 27. On 21 February, after some soldiers had photographed him before take-off - always considered a bad omen - he was caught by a Kittyhawk of 112 Sqn. and shot down. As he struggled to crash-land his Bf 109 in no-man's-land he heard his *Kapitän,* Homuth, exclaim over the radio: "Who is the damned idiot being shot down?" Stahlschmidt was rescued by an Axis patrol and taken back to Martuba, but six days later he was attacking a group of trucks near Bir el Gobi in company with his wingman, *Fw.* Gerhard Keppler, when his engine cut and he rammed one of the vehicles. After being dragged from the cockpit of his Messerschmitt by Polish troops, he was beaten with rifle butts, kicked, and his decorations were ripped off. He was then taken to an interrogation camp but managed to escape, eventually being rescued by German troops on 1 March.

The next day, four Bf 109s from I./JG 27 attacked 11 Hurricanes from 274 Sqn. and shot down three, two by Homuth and one by *Lt.* Karl Kügelbauer. A total of 57 victories were claimed by JG 27 in February with operations slightly reducing in March when both sides engaged mainly in fighter sweeps or fighter-bomber sorties. During this month, JG 27 claimed a total of 35 victories and 43 in April. By May a period of relative calm on the ground was ending with both sides readying themselves for a big offensive, the only question being who would be the first to attack? At this time, the *Luftwaffe* day fighter force comprised I., II., III. and 10.(*Jabo*)/JG 27 with 101 Bf 109 Fs all based at Martuba, south-east of Derna, and 7./ZG 26 with 12 Bf 110s at Derna. These were bolstered by the arrival of 30 more Bf 109s from III./JG 53, 15 Bf 110s from 8./ZG 26 and 40 Ju 87 dive bombers from II. and III./St.G 3.

On the British side, the first B-24 Liberator bombers arrived in the desert at this time and also, at last, the first Spitfires. As previously mentioned, substantial numbers of Spitfires had been sent to defend Malta but, otherwise, while air commanders in the Mediterranean were crying out for them, the largest number of Spitfires was retained in Great Britain. When examined retrospectively, this policy is open to question as, in 1942, the key actions in the air war were being fought over Malta and the Western Desert. No comparable air actions were being fought in the West, yet a large force of Spitfires was nevertheless kept in Great Britain at a time when they were urgently required in other theatres of war, particularly the Mediterranean. It would appear that this degree of over-insurance was insisted upon by the Air Officer C-in-C Fighter Command in order that he might retain a force adequate in strength to meet all possible eventualities.

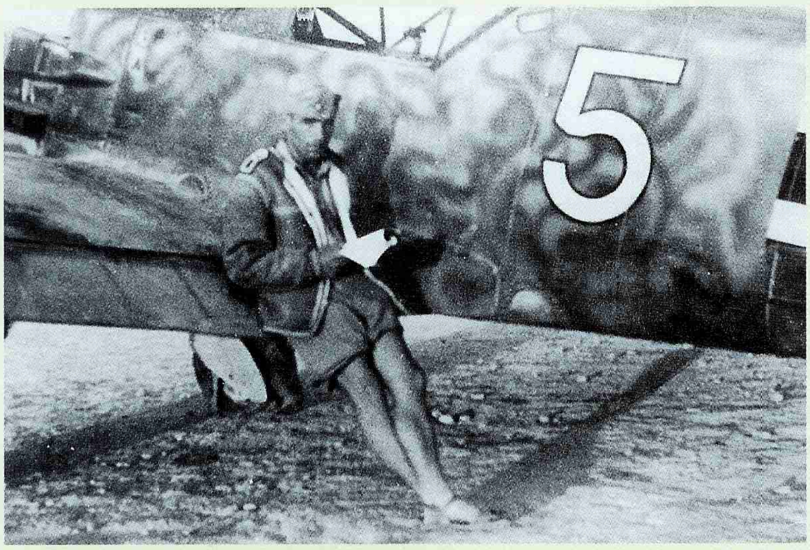
Rommel's plan was to use his infantry to mount a frontal assault on the Gazala line while his armour drove around its southern edge, attempting to capture the old Italian desert fort at Bir Hacheim which, manned by Free French soldiers, marked the southernmost part of the British defences.

The Fate of Ofw. Albert Espenlaub

Anyone who has visited the war graves managed today by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, will not be surprised to learn that some cemeteries contain headstones commemorating German soldiers. At Rameleh, about 20 km from Jerusalem, there is a cemetery which, as well as being the final resting place for several hundred Commonweath soldiers killed during the First and Second World Wars, also contains the remains of Luftwaffe pilot Albert Espenlaub. Several historians have stated, incorrectly, that Espenlaub was killed in aerial combat, or mention only that he made an emergency landing; invariably they fail to explain that today he lies in the War Graves cemetery at Rameleh. This is his story.

Albert Espenlaub was born on 25 August 1913 in Balzholt, today part of Beuren, in Baden Württemberg, about 40 km south of Stuttgart. The Espenlaub family was already connected with aviation and, indeed, Albert's older brother, Gottlob, born 13 years earlier, had grown up with a fascination for aeronautics which, in 1919, resulted in him being involved in the first of the Röhn glider trials on the Wasserkuppe. Later, Gottlob began building his own aircraft and gained world-wide fame in aviation circles for various feats which included making the first flight in a rocket-powered aircraft. Eventually, Gottlob launched his own company, *Espenlaub Flugzeugbau* which, after a modest beginning, quickly grew with premises successively located in Kassel, Goslar and later in Düsseldorf where the company was then completing aircraft at the rate of one per day. In 1939, the company moved to Wuppertal but, with the outbreak of war and the construction of private aircraft becoming more difficult, *Espenlaub Flugzeugbau* was engaged in the repair of Ju 87s and various fighter aircraft. Later, branches of the company were created at Riga in Latvia, and at Reval in Estonia, by which time the company employed about 3,000 workers.

To the great disappointment of Gottlob, who offered his brother a good position in his company, Albert was determined to become a *Jagdflieger* and entered the *Wehrmacht* in 1937. With his flying-training completed, at the end of 1940 Albert Espenlaub was transferred as an *Unteroffizier* to 1./JG 27, then under the command of *Oblt.* Wolfgang Redlich. Espenlaub claimed his first victory, a Hurricane near Tobruk, on 21 April 1941, the second day his *Staffel* was in action in North Africa, but in spite of his outstanding abilities as a pilot, claimed no more victories until November. By 15 November, he had made three claims and on that day claimed his fourth, again a Hurricane, and ended the month with a total of 12 victories including three on the 23rd. On 7 December he shot down a P-40 and on the 11th, a Blenheim. This was to be his last victory for, two days later, he was himself shot down. His *Staffelführer*, *Oblt.* Hugo Schneider, described what happened in the following letter, addressed to the Espenlaub family, and dated 1 January 1942:



Ofw. Espenlaub seated on the wing of Bf 109 E-7 'White 5' soon after arriving in North Africa (*LEFT*) and (*ABOVE*) examining the remains of a burned-out Hurricane.

> *"[...] On 13 December, we had a fight with English Hurricanes over enemy territory. Your son, who had already claimed 14 victories, dived too soon towards one enemy aircraft and received hits in the cooling system of his aircraft's engine. His comrades immediately drew the attention of the English on themselves in order to allow Albert and his damaged aircraft to leave the danger area and find protection in the clouds. He was last seen flying into such a cloud.*
>
> *After a hit in the cooling system, the engine only runs five more minutes, after which one must land. I am certain that Albert made an emergency landing and was taken prisoner, unwounded, by the English who always treat captured airmen correctly and fairly. However, we are still waiting confirmation of this and although there is still a chance that he might be able to reach our lines and return to his unit, for the time being we must consider him missing in action. Should we receive any information from the English, I will inform you immediately.*
>
> *I am sorry that Albert is no longer with the Staffel, not only because he was our best fighter pilot, but also because I felt very close to him as a personal friend who taught me a lot.[...]"*

In fact, Hugo Schneider was correct in believing that his friend was alive and in captivity, although he was probably never certain of this as he was himself killed in combat with a P-40 on 11 January. The same day, *Ofw.* Albert Espenlaub wrote his parents a one-page letter from Cage No. 14, Prisoner of War Camp No. 321, which included the following lines:

> *"Dear Parents!*
> *By now, the reason for my long silence will be clear to you. On 13 December I had to make a belly-landing and I am now a prisoner of the English.*
>
> *My health is pretty good and I hope that this is also the case with you.*
>
> *Unfortunately, I wasn't able to be home for Christmas as I had hoped and I must say how sorry I was about this."*

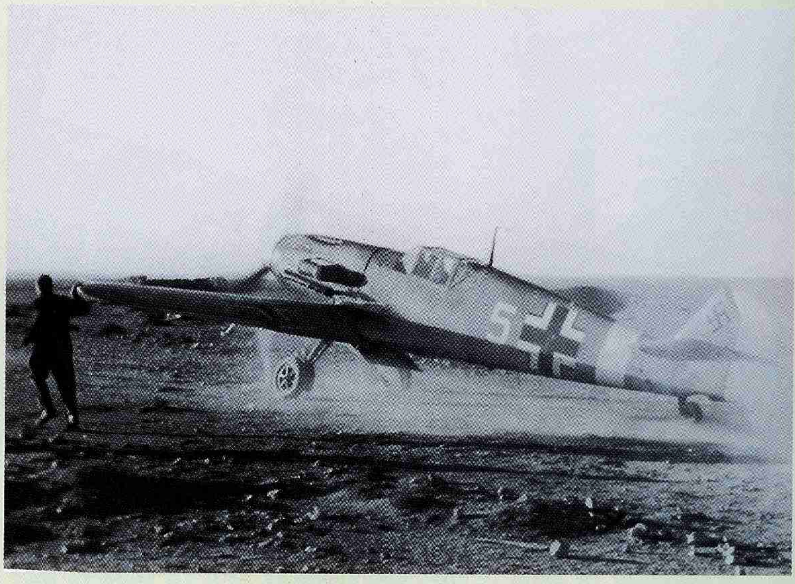
In due course, the Espenlaub family received another letter, this time from the German Red Cross, which read:

> *"[...] Via the Spanish consul in Jerusalem and the Spanish Foreign Ministry, which contacted the German Embassy in Madrid, we have learned that a representative of the British armed forces has advised the Spanish authorities that in the early morning of 25 February 1942, Oberfeldwebel Albert Espenlaub was shot by guards while attempting to escape from a PoW camp One shot was fired which killed him instantly. [...]"*

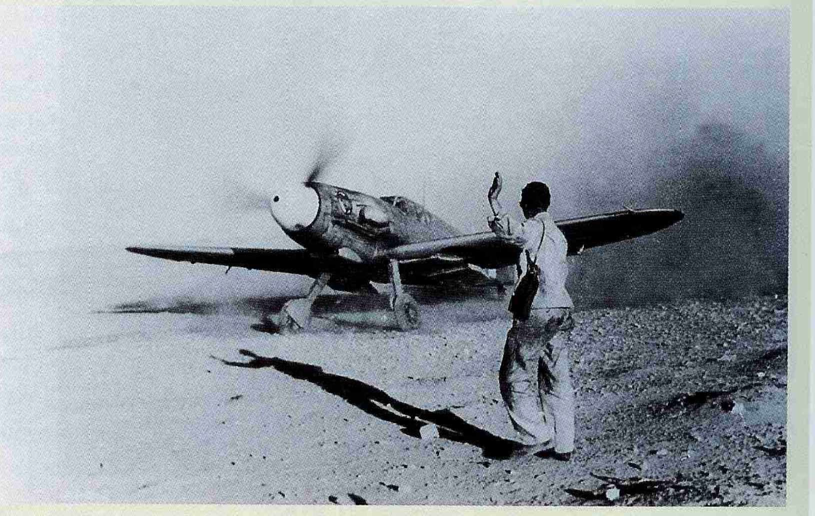
Also in the PoW camp at that time was Otto Berchner, one of Albert Espenlaub's contemporaries who had flown with 7./ZG 26 and who knew Espenlaub. Berchner was later transferred to Canada in August 1942 and, many years after the war, he visited the cemetery near the camp and discovered Espenlaub's grave. He recalled:

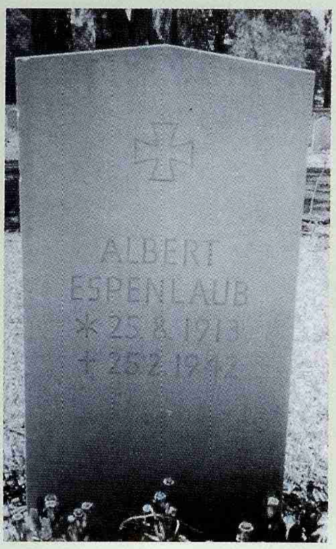
> *"In early 1942, there were about 25-30 officers and an equivalent number of other ranks in the camp which was situated about 12 km from Jerusalem. Most of the PoWs were members of the Afrika Korps but there were also, like me, members of the Luftwaffe who had been shot down and captured. The morale among us prisoners varied greatly. There were those who realised that the Allies outnumbered the Afrika Korps and no longer believed in a German victory. On the other hand, there were several others who still wanted to fight again, and it was not unusual to hear men discussing the possibility of escaping and reaching our lines. Personally, I never heard Espenlaub speak about his plans, but during the night of 24-25 February, while we were asleep, he slipped out of our barracks and succeeded in getting over the first barbed-wire barricade. But, as he was attempting to get over the second one, he was discovered by a guard who opened fire. We were awoken by the sound of the shot and saw the tragic scene. Later, we were told that the guard responsible - a Jew - had been court-martialled. Espenlaub was not the only German shot in this camp and I can recall at least two others."*

As a final postscript, it should be mentioned that although Espenlaub was probably not aware of it, in Germany a young woman was expecting his child. Whether knowledge of this would have deterred him from risking his life in his escape attempt or made him even more determined to return is not known, but in due course the woman gave birth to a son, whom she named Albert, after his father. He lives today, in Australia.

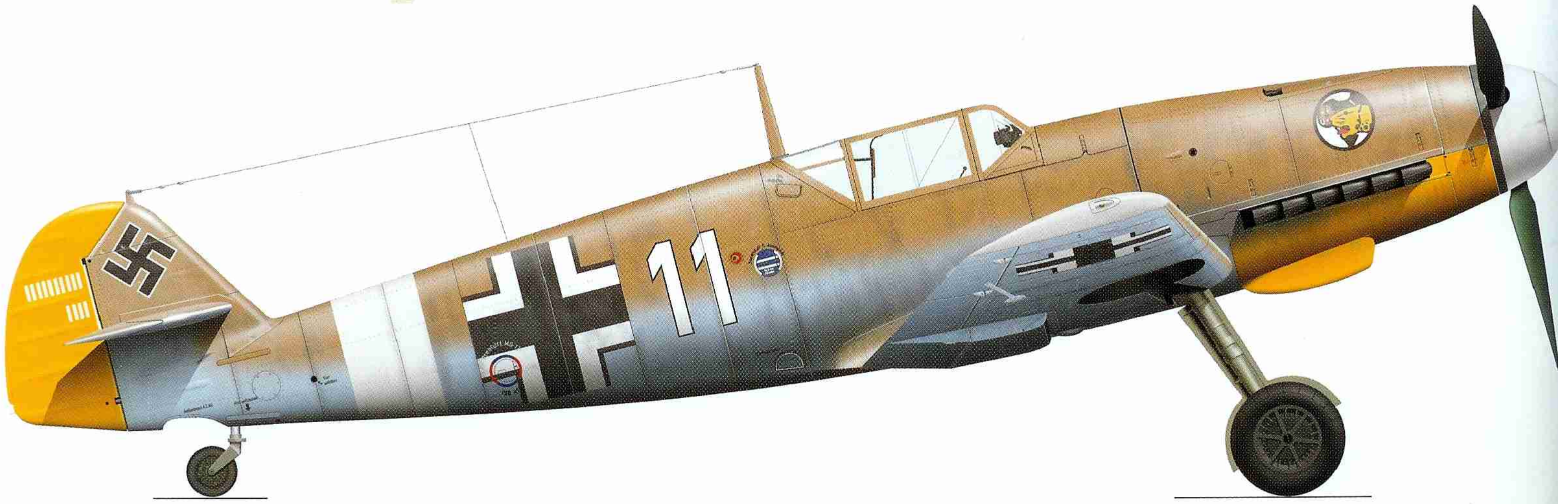


ABOVE: Espenlaub later flew this Bf 109 F-4, also coded 'White 5'. Barely visible on the rudder are 11 white victory bars, the last representing a Boston shot down south of Gazala on 24 November 1941. As Espenlaub's 12th victory was claimed the next day, it is possible that this photograph (*BELOW*) shows Espenlaub landing after a sortie flown on the 25th during which he shot down a P-40 south-east of Tobruk.

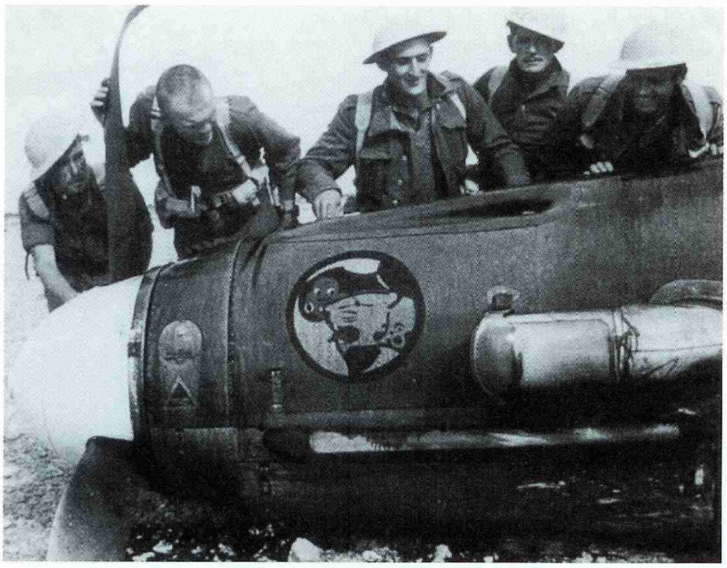




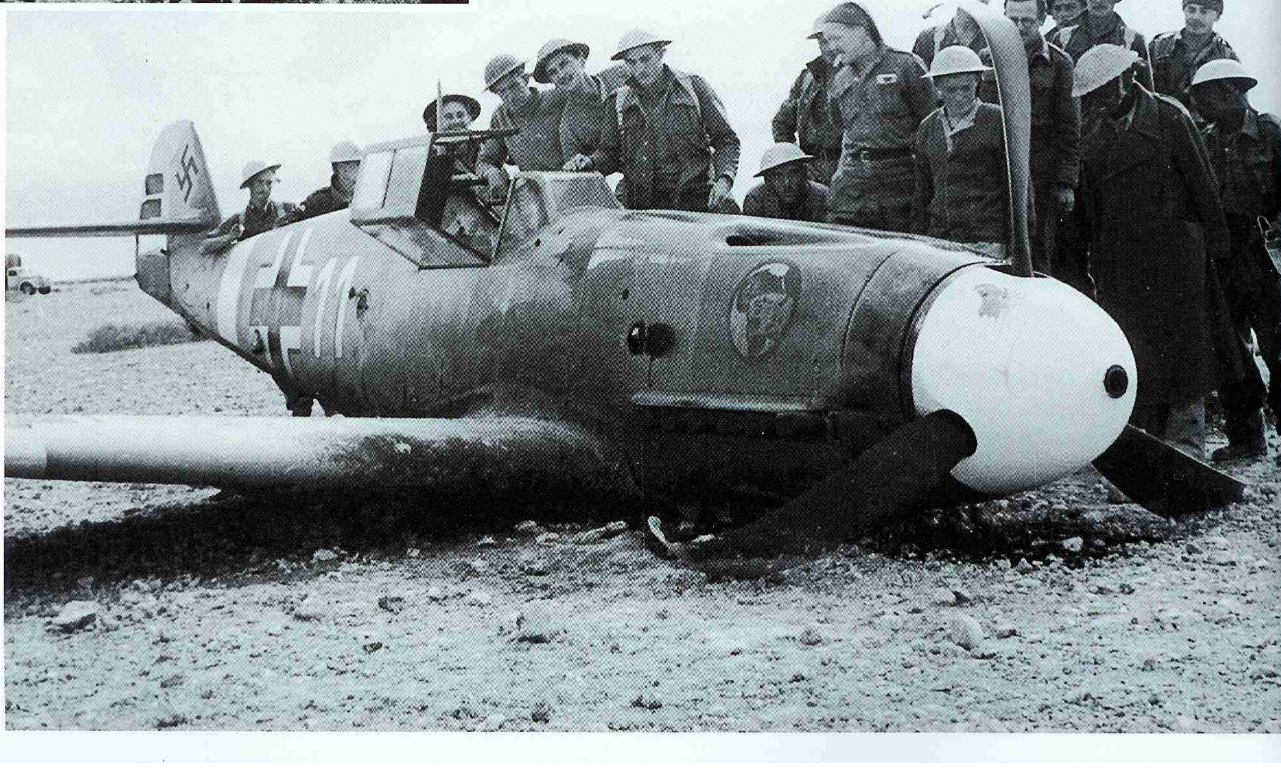
LEFT: Espenlaub's gravestone in the British and Commonwealth war grave at Rameleh, formerly in Palestine, now in Israel.

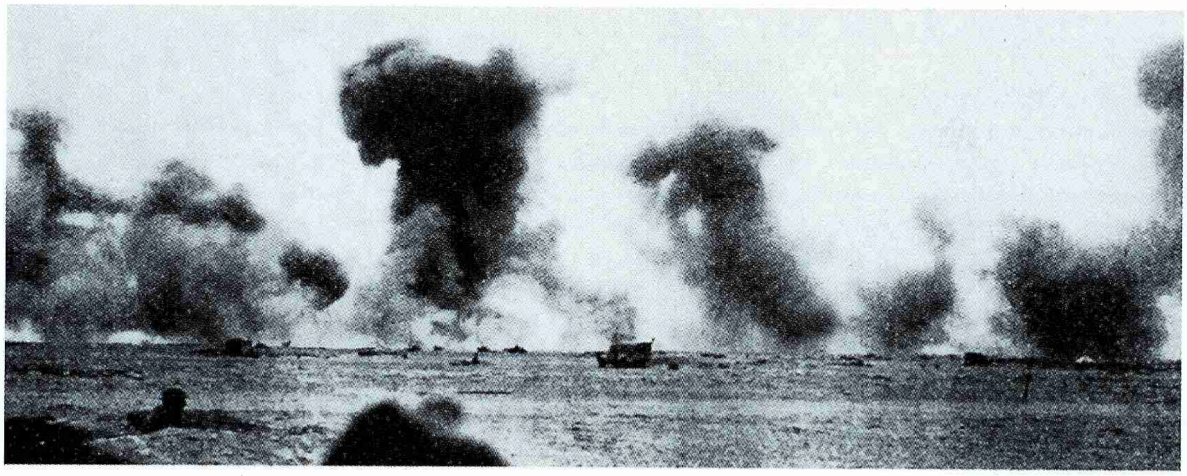


Messerchmitt Bf 109 F-4 Trop 'White 11' flown by Ofw. Albert Espenlaub of 1./JG 27, December 1941
This aircraft is depicted as it is believed to have appeared shortly before it was shot down on 13 December. It was finished in standard 79 Sand Yellow uppersurfaces with 78 undersurfaces and white theatre markings. The 14 victory bars are speculative and are based on the Abschussbalken seen on the rudder of this pilot's 'White 5', shown on the previous page.



LEFT AND BELOW: British soldiers posing near El Adem with Ofw. Albert Espenlaub's Bf 109 F-4 Trop, 'White 11'. During air combat on 13 December 1941, this aircraft, W.Nr. 8477, received damage to its engine cooling system and crash-landed behind Allied lines. At this time, Espenlaub had 14 victories but the two rows of Abschussbalken, which would have appeared on the rudder above the large tear in the fabric, have already been removed as souvenirs. Note that the aircraft appears darker than usual in these photographs on account of the liberal amount of boiling oil which has sprayed from the engine and coated most of the fuselage and leading edge of the fin. Ofw. Espenlaub was captured uninjured but later was shot by a guard and killed while trying to escape from a PoW camp in Palestine.





LEFT: This photograph was taken during a dive-bomber attack on Bir Hacheim, where, during Rommel's drive to Gazala, a beleaguered garrison of Free French troops held out until June 1942 against artillery, dive-bombers, infantry and tanks.

Rommel struck on 26 May, his first attack taking him up to the British lines but soft sand and minefields bogged down his two Italian armoured divisions. Next day, the British Eighth Army, the armoured components of which now included the American Grant tank with its 75 mm gun, halted the German *Panzers*. A savage tank battle now developed, concentrated around an area situated between Bir Hacheim and the coast known to the British as *'Knightsbridge'*.

On 28 May, Eighth Army requested that British fighters be ordered to cease virtually all their air superiority patrols and concentrate on ground strafing. During these intensive operations, eight British fighters were claimed by JG 27, one by *Fw.* Günther Steinhausen of 1./JG 27, two by *Oblt.* Otto Schulz of II./JG 27, one each by *Oblt.* Ferdinand Vögl, *Lt.* Hans Doyé, *Ofw.* Alfred Schulze and *Obgefr.* Heinrich Vanderweert of II./JG 27, and one by *Uffz.* Viktor Gruber of 7./JG 27. Early in the morning of the 29th, a large air battle developed between 13 Bf 109s from II./JG 27 and III./JG 53 and Hurricanes of 80 Sqn. and Kittyhawks of 2 (SAAF) Sqn., five Commonwealth pilots being lost. Shortly afterwards six Bf 109s from III./JG 27 escorting Ju 87s over Ancoma clashed with Kittyhawks from 450 Sqn. (RAAF). Two Ju 87s and a Bf 109 (piloted by *Lt.* Erik von Fritsch) were shot down but *Hptm.* Ernst Maak, *Lt.* Stahlschmidt and *Lt.* Körner, all from 2./JG 27, each shot down a Kittyhawk.

Next day saw even more intensive combat, major strikes being carried out by Boston bombers and fighter-bombers against *'Knightsbridge'*, during which four Bf 109s from I./JG 27 clashed with Kittyhawks of 250 Sqn., *Oblt.* Marseille shooting down one early in the morning. Soon afterwards, III./JG 53 escorted six Bf 110s on a reconnaissance sortie but *Oblt.* Wilfried Pufahl was shot down by mistake by a Ju 88. Four Bf 109s from I./JG 27 then attacked nine bombers escorted by 15 fighters. *Fw.* Gerhard Keppler shot down one of the latter but *Uffz.* Zimmermann was forced to crash-land north of Tmimi. During the afternoon, Messerschmitts from *Stab* I./JG 27 and 4./JG 53 clashed with more RAF Bostons with fighter escort, the German pilots claiming five P-40s, two by *Fw.* Emil Kaiser. Just after 16.00 hrs *Oblt.* Vögl of 4./JG 27 shot down a Hurricane and two more P-40s and *Ofw.* Karl-Heinz Bendert destroyed yet another P-40. About an hour later, three more RAF fighters were claimed by 2./JG 27 followed by a P-40 shot down during the evening by *Oblt.* Otto Schulz of II./JG 27.

The last day of May was marked by heavy sandstorms, although these did little to curtail operations, and very early in the morning an offensive sweep by Hurricanes and Tomahawks met Ju 87s escorted by 4./JG 27. Four P-40s were destroyed, two by *Oblt.* Vögl. Around 07.30 hours I./JG 27 and 8./JG 53 escorting Ju 87s clashed with 4 (SAAF) Sqn. and claimed the destruction of no less than eight P-40s. During the early evening *Oblt.* Otto Schülz of *Stab* II./JG 27 bounced a mixed Tomahawk and Kittyhawk formation and shot down two (the latter his 50th victory). The final action of the day involved *Stab* III./JG 53 which claimed three Kittyhawks from 260 Sqn. although only one was confirmed. During the day the *Luftwaffe* lost *Oblt.* Emmerich Fluder who failed to return, *Fw.* Fritz Gromotka who was reported missing and *Ofw.* Erich Krenzke taken prisoner.

By the end of the month, the situation on the ground was beginning to turn in the favour of the Axis forces. The one problem was that Bir Hacheim had failed to be taken by the Italians and supplies had run so low that Rommel himself went through the British minefields to guide a convoy carrying fuel, water and ammunition. If the Eighth Army could have found the means and the will at this time to exert maximum pressure against an *Afrika Korps* starved of supplies, the Axis forces might have been brought to their knees. Sadly for the British, however, they frittered away their armoured strength in a number of poorly coordinated attacks against the *Afrika Korps* in the north, and the Axis at last began to get the upper

"I am where I belong."

Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt of 2./JG 27.

In order to complete this short account on Eichenlaubträger Hans-Arnold 'Fifi' Stahlschmidt, the third-ranking Luftwaffe ace of the campaign in the Western Desert, we were able to contact his brother, Harald Stahlschmidt. Still interested in collecting material connected with his brother, Harald provided valuable details as well as various wartime letters.

Born on 15 September 1920, Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt was posted to 2./JG 27 in April 1941 and, as an *Oberfähnrich*, or senior officer cadet, claimed his first victory, a Hurricane, over Sollum on 15 June 1941. During the Autumn of 1941 Stahlschmidt, now a *Leutnant*, often flew in the *Stab* of I./JG 27, with which, on 20 November, within ten minutes of each other he shot down three Martin Maryland bombers south-east of Tobruk as his second, third and fourth victories.

Letter dated 31 January 1942.
"As I write, I am sitting alone and lonely at an airbase somewhere in the desert [...]. I have an inner feeling of being united with the events occurring here and with the desert itself. I don't want to know anything concerning the outside world and wish only to do my duty in surroundings which have to be accepted as they are, more wild than civilised. One has to be content with the simple life and to make no demands, but all the same, there is not a little attraction for the desert and its wildlife. Here one tends to grow closer and become united with everything until one loves this place just as a second home."

Letter dated 18 February 1942
"Today we had the coldest day and the coldest night I have ever experienced in Africa. In the evening the clouds parted and the sky was clear and covered with stars, but don't ask how cold it was during the night. Yesterday's rain will probably be the last. I hope that due to this rain the magnificent display of Cyrenaican flowers will remain for a while. Soon we are expecting the radio to announce that Marseille has been awarded the Knight's Cross. He is a terrific fellow and he has really earned the Knight's Cross. It is certain that he will soon receive the Oak Leaves, too, since he has 48 victories. He can shoot like a young God, but above all he can fire accurately and spectacularly while in a turn, comparable only to such experts as Mölders and Galland. The rest of us shoot into empty sky."

Shortly after 11.00 hrs on 21 February 1942, Stahlschmidt took off from Martuba as part of a formation of six Bf 109s led by the *Staffelkapitän* of 3./JG 27, *Hptm*. Gerhard Homuth (40 victories) and his wingman. Within the main formation was a *Rotte* led by *Lt*. Hans-Joachim Marseille (at that time with 49 victories) while *Lt*. Stahlschmidt, as usual flying the *Adjutant's* machine, and *Fw*. Gerhard Keppler flew as *Deckungs*, or covering, *Rotte*. After about an hour in the air they spotted a formation of Curtiss P-40s and were trying to gain altitude to attack them when Stahlschmidt's Bf 109 F-4 was hit from below. Stahlschmidt was more surprised than afraid; he had felt so confident that he had failed to check his rear and it was therefore with some justification that Homuth radioed, "Who is the damned idiot being shot down?"

Despite his damaged machine, Stahlschmidt was able to avoid further attack and, to shorten the flight back to his lines, decided to fly over the sea. He finally succeeded in reaching what he thought was an area of no man's land near El Gazala where he crash-landed his burning aircraft beside a road. He quickly abandoned his machine but then, in spite of a slight wound in the arm and light burns, twice returned to the now flaming remains to retrieve his parachute, radio and *Revi*. He then retired to a safe distance and watched as his aircraft finally exploded and burned out. This lasted for several minutes, after which Stahlschmidt was approached by two soldiers. They called to him in German and confirmed that he had not come down behind enemy lines. Nevertheless, the danger was not entirely past; first the three men had to evade some enemy vehicles which drove out to investigate the wreck. Then, as they retired, they had to carefully pick their way through a minefield before they were safe within their own lines.

When Stahlschmidt returned to Martuba, he discovered that in the engagement in which he had been shot down, Homuth had claimed one P-40 and Marseille two, thus bringing his total number of victories to 50. However, Homuth - perhaps aware of how the *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 27, *Oblt*. Erbo *Graf* von Kageneck, had been badly wounded in a similar attack from below two weeks previously - had already declared Stahlschmidt killed in action. He was allowed three rest days in which to recover from his wounds and recuperate from his emotional ordeal.

On the 26th, *Lt*. Stahlschmidt and *Fw*. Keppler again took off together, this time to act as escort for a reconnaissance aircraft. However, the reconnaissance aircraft soon became lost from view due to dust clouds, and the two fighter pilots set out to search for targets of opportunity. Discovering a large concentration of vehicles, they circled above before diving down to strafe them, only to break off immediately when they observed that the soldiers leaping out of the vehicles were wearing green uniforms, as worn by their Italian allies. Abandoning the attack, the two pilots made for home, but then Stahlschmidt's aircraft developed engine trouble and he was obliged to make a hasty landing amid a concentration of lorries. Once out of his aircraft, he realised immediately that he was not among Axis allies but was surrounded by Polish soldiers. He thus became a prisoner and was first interrogated by the Poles. Later, he was handed over to the British where he was again questioned and, under the guard of two soldiers, was that evening driven to a camp. Immediately, Stahlschmidt realised that, as he was not far from the front and had not been bound or handcuffed, his chances of escaping were good. Indeed, during the middle of the night, both guards fell asleep and slowly, silently, Stahlschmidt crept away. Unseen, he stole through some parked vehicles and then, once away from the camp, began running as fast and as far as his feet would carry him.

During the night, he struck the Via Balbia, the main, Italian-built, coastal road. Moving cautiously throughout the whole of the following day, by early evening he had reached the scene of his first crash-landing. Now he knew he was almost safe, and taking care to avoid the mines, finally made his way back to friendly territory.

He was immediately greeted by a German soldier who asked, "*Herr Leutnant*, how did you get here?". Surprised, as he had received some rough treatment at the hands of the Poles and had lost all his decorations and badges of rank, Stahlschmidt enquired how the soldier knew he was a *Leutnant*. "But you were here a few days ago!" the soldier replied, coincidentally recognising the tired but immensely happy *Luftwaffe* officer as the very same man he had led through the minefield a few days previously.

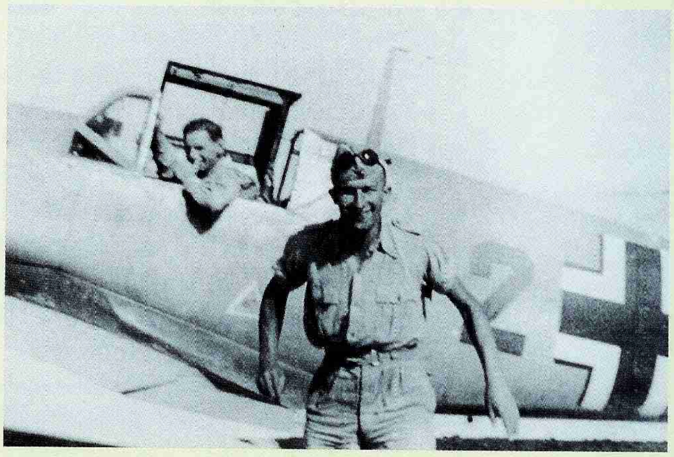
To reach safety, Stahlschmidt had run nearly 80 kilometres and had been 16 hours without water. When he was again returned to his surprised comrades, it was with mixed feeling for, although joyful, he found he could obtain no rest until he had told and retold many times the story of his escape. For this adventure, he was awarded the *Deutsches Kreuz in Gold* on 9 April 1942.

Later, after being granted a further short spell of leave, Stahlschmidt returned to the desert and, in a letter dated 15 April 1942, wrote:

"Yesterday I arrived back in Africa again and everything went well. Once more I am in my second home, back with my close friends who greeted me with cheers. In a few words, I have returned to where I belong. Africa is so beautiful that I don't find it difficult to understand why I am so closely attached to it. [...] One feels one's self to be at home. I received a new aircraft, so what more could I possibly want?"

On 22 May, Stahlschmidt claimed his ninth victory and by 20 August, by which date he was *Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 27, he had increased his tally to 47 and was awarded the *Ritterkreuz*. Further successes followed and on 6 September he shot down a P-40 as his 59th victory. He was last seen the following day, in combat with a Spitfire about 30 kilometres south-west of El Alamein. Later, he was awarded the *Eichenlaub* and promoted to the rank of *Oberleutnant*.

Until her death, Hans-Arnold Stahlschmidt's mother maintained close contact with the association of former German fighter pilots to discover further information about her missing son. However, all her endeavours were in vain and, even today, details of his exact fate remain unknown.



On the afternoon of 7 September 1942, Lt. Karl von Lieres und Wilkau (in cockpit) and Lt. Stahlschmidt, (foreground) both of 2./JG 27, were flying as part of a Schwarm on a freie Jagd near El Alamein when they were attacked by Spitfires of 601 Sqn. and both shot down. Von Lieres forced landed and survived, but Stahlschmidt was posted missing, believed killed.

hand in the battle for *'Knightsbridge'*. After an epic stand of nine days when they were under almost constant attack from the *Luftwaffe*, the remaining Free French at last surrendered Bir Hacheim on 10 June 1942.

The air support requested by Panzer Army HQ for its last attack on Hacheim at 19.00 hrs was completed with a high degree of success by a force of 39 Ju 87s. Bombs were dropped on the chief centre of enemy resistance, namely artillery positions located 2 km north of Hacheim. I respectfully request that [...] special commendations be included in an order of the day for both St.G 3 and JG 27, whose outstanding performance as a fighter escort enabled the dive bombers to accomplish their mission without a single loss. Furthermore, I should like to suggest that - if Hacheim ever surrenders - special official mention be made of the role played by the Luftwaffe. [...]

Signed, Waldau.

Supplement to the day's teletype message from Fliegerführer Afrika to Kesselring, 9 June 1942

I am taking this opportunity to express my special appreciation and my deep gratitude for the performance of St.G 3 and JG 27 during the operations at Hacheim. The missions flown by these two units reveal an exemplary spirit of co-operation and selflessness on the part of all participants. Our attacks must succeed in defeating the British attacks in North Africa. This is our goal; all our thoughts and all our efforts must be directed to its attainment.

Signed, Kesselring,
Commander in Chief, South.

Message from Kesselring to Fliegerführer Afrika, 10 June 1942, in response to message above.

Three days later, the German 90. Light Division captured El Adem and the following day the Eighth Army began a general retreat from Gazala. Some units returned to the Tobruk perimeter while others escaped into the desert further south and made for the Egyptian frontier. Rommel wished to swing the *Afrika Korps* round in a great encircling manoeuvre to trap the fleeing Eighth Army, but his troops had reached the limits of their physical reserves. Later, at El Alamein, New Zealand soldiers recovered the diaries of German soldiers who had fought through the Gazala battles. The entries showed the men had fought for days on end with only brief spells of sleep, one such dairy stating simply: 'No sleep again'.

This period was marked by intense aerial battles in which British fighters inflicted heavy losses on the German Ju 87 dive-bombers. In turn, the British fighters suffered very badly from the Bf 109 units, the experienced German pilots often awaiting an opportunity to sweep down and clear them from the skies. On 17 June, for example, Marseille claimed the destruction of five RAF fighters, bringing his total of victories to 101, but on the same day *Oblt.* Otto Schulz from II./JG 27 was shot down by a Kittyhawk near Sidi Rezegh after scoring his 51st victory. He was the first great desert ace to die.

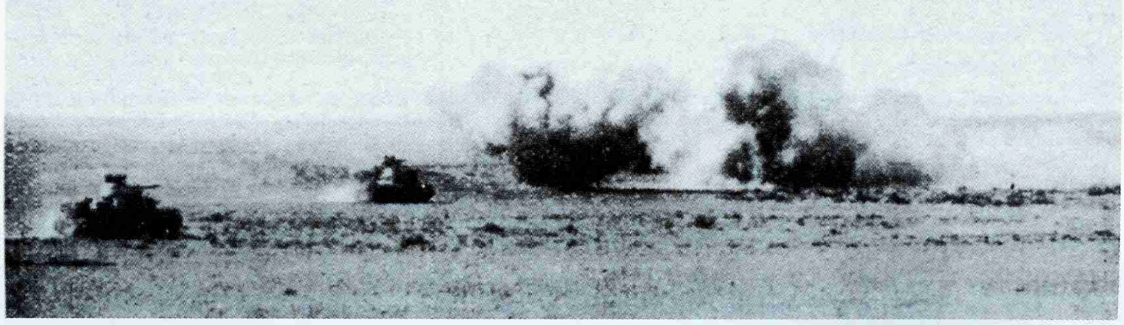
By 18 June, Tobruk itself was besieged again, with Rommel launching an attack on the mainly South African garrison two days later. The assault was preceded by a massive air attack by *Gefechtsverband Sigel* (an ad hoc unit combining two Ju 87 *Gruppen* plus III./ZG 26 and 2.(*H*)/14) to soften up the defences, and then the German and Italian artillery opened up on the port. This time, in contrast to 1941, Rommel knew just what lay ahead of him and the pioneers bridged the first anti-tank ditches for the waiting tanks and lorry-borne infantry which stormed ahead and into the fortress. The plan worked and, late on 21 June, an elated Rommel accepted the surrender of the garrison commander, General Klopper.

ABOVE: A German field gun crew in action against British positions.

> ***Dear Kesselring,***
> ***The Luftwaffe units under your command have played a vital role in our glorious victory at Tobruk. During the past weeks they have fought the enemy with devastating success on land, at sea and in the air and have thereby provided most valuable support for Rommel's Panzer Army in its heroic battle. I take this opportunity to express to you, and to your men, my gratitude and my sincere congratulations for the part played by the Luftwaffe in a decisive success in the Mediterranean and at Tobruk.***
>
> ***Signed, Göring,***
> ***Reichsmarschall of Greater Germany and C-in-C of the German Luftwaffe.***
> *Message from Göring to Kesselring dated 22 June 1942*

Contrary to an earlier commitment to stop at Tobruk until Malta had been taken, Rommel now issued an order to prepare *Panzerarmee Afrika* to move off in pursuit of the disorganised columns of British survivors from the Gazala battles straggling into Egypt. Fearing he might never again have such an opportunity, and confident that Hitler would authorise his actions, Rommel decided to follow the Eighth Army and destroy it as soon as possible.

On 22 June, I. and III./JG 27 and II./JG 53 moved to airfields around Gambut and four days later a record number of sorties were flown by both sides. A total of 28 British aircraft were claimed by the four *Luftwaffe* fighter *Gruppen*, 13 by I./JG 27, eight each by II./JG 27, five by III./JG 27 and two by



RIGHT: Axis armour advancing under fire.

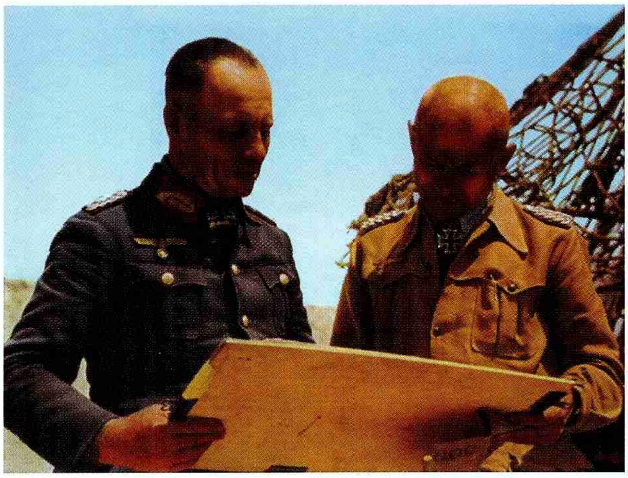
III./JG 53. Prominent among the successful pilots were *Lt.* Friedrich Körner with five, *Lt.* Stahlschmidt with four, and *Lt.* Werner Schroer with three victories.

Two problems now began to make themselves felt with both the German ground and air forces. The first was a serious lack of fuel so serious that on 27 June III./JG 53 was able to fly only one mission of four Bf 109s and the tanks of the *Afrika Korps* were also beginning to run out as they re-crossed the Egyptian border. The other problem was that while the Axis Forces had been behind the Gazala line, *Luftwaffe* units in Africa had been able to support German forces in North Africa and at the same time attack Malta and the convoys attempting to supply the island. Now, the rapid German advance had placed the convoys beyond their range and, at the same time, the strong *Luftwaffe* presence in Sicily was being withdrawn to support the drive to the Caucasus already under way in Russia. Again it was proved that the Italian Air Force and Navy were not strong enough to repeat the performance of the *Luftwaffe* the previous Spring which had neutralised Malta as a base for attacks against Axis convoys.

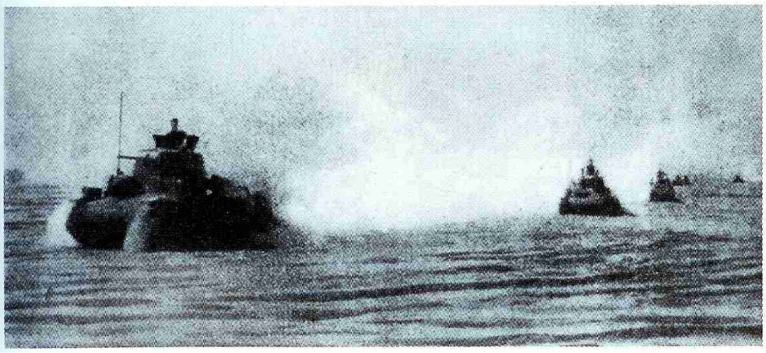
Conversely, Commonwealth forces did possess some reserves and Auchinleck now rushed the New Zealand Division from Palestine, together with British armour and some Indian troops, to occupy a blocking position at Mersa Matruh. This force was in fact much stronger than the advancing German columns pushed on by Rommel. For example, when the 21. *Panzer Division* reached Mersa Matruh on 27 June, it was less than a thousand personnel strong, and its *Panzer Regiment* 5 had only 23 tanks. Rommel now made for the last British line of defence before Alexandria and the Nile Delta at El Alamein, a narrow neck of desert running between the coast and the impenetrable marshy sand of the Qattara Depression. It was considered the best defensive position along the entire North African coast and as long as the line itself held, it could not be attacked from the rear as the Qattara Depression made any outflanking manoeuvre to the south impossible.

On the morning of the 30 June 1942, a line of vehicles under the command of *Hptm.* Briel and comprising half-track troop carriers, a few trucks and some mobile anti-tank guns, drove up against the first minefield in the El Alamein line. Despite being seriously understrength, Rommel was confident that he could break through, bypass and surround El Alamein. His forces moved off on 1 July. The first Battle for El Alamein had begun.

ABOVE: Erwin Rommel was undoubtedly a tactical genius and, in conditions of fluid fighting, was more than a match for any British general pitted against him. After the fall of Tobruk, Hitler promoted him to Generalfeldmarschall. Here, Rommel is seen directing his troops.

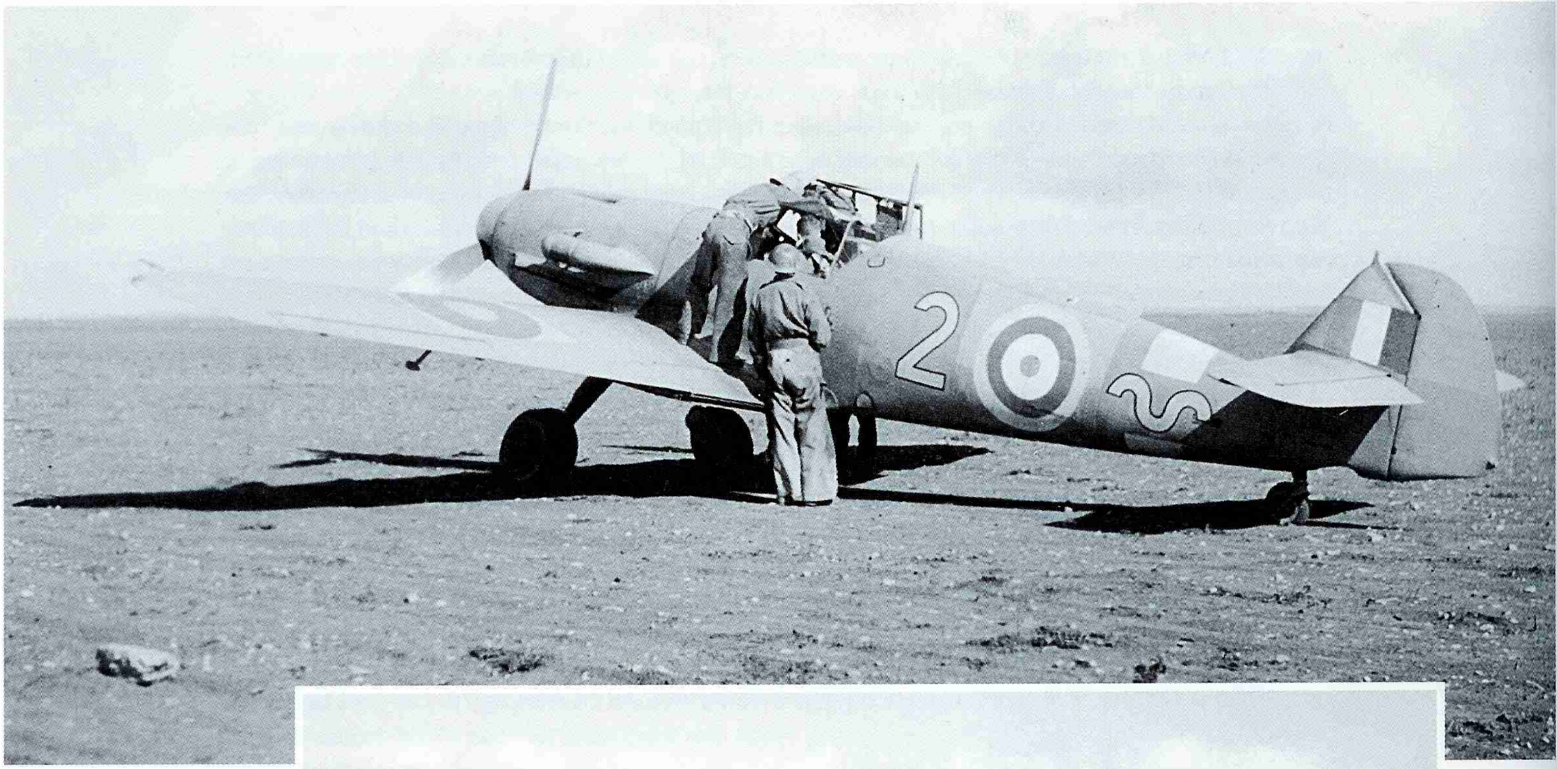


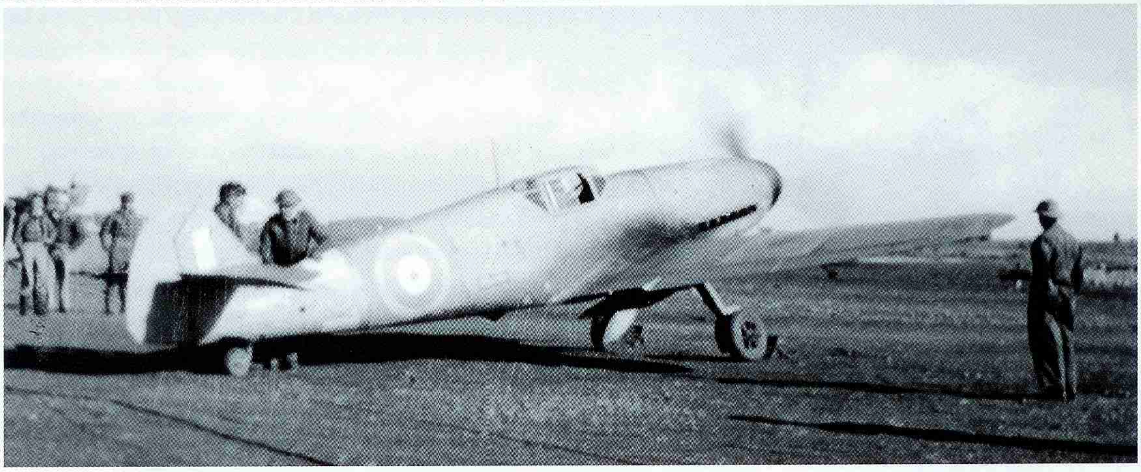
LEFT: Generalfeldmarschall Rommel, left, confers with Generalleutnant Stefan Fröhlich, who took over from Generalleutnant Hoffmann von Waldau as Fliegerführer Afrika on 16 March 1942.



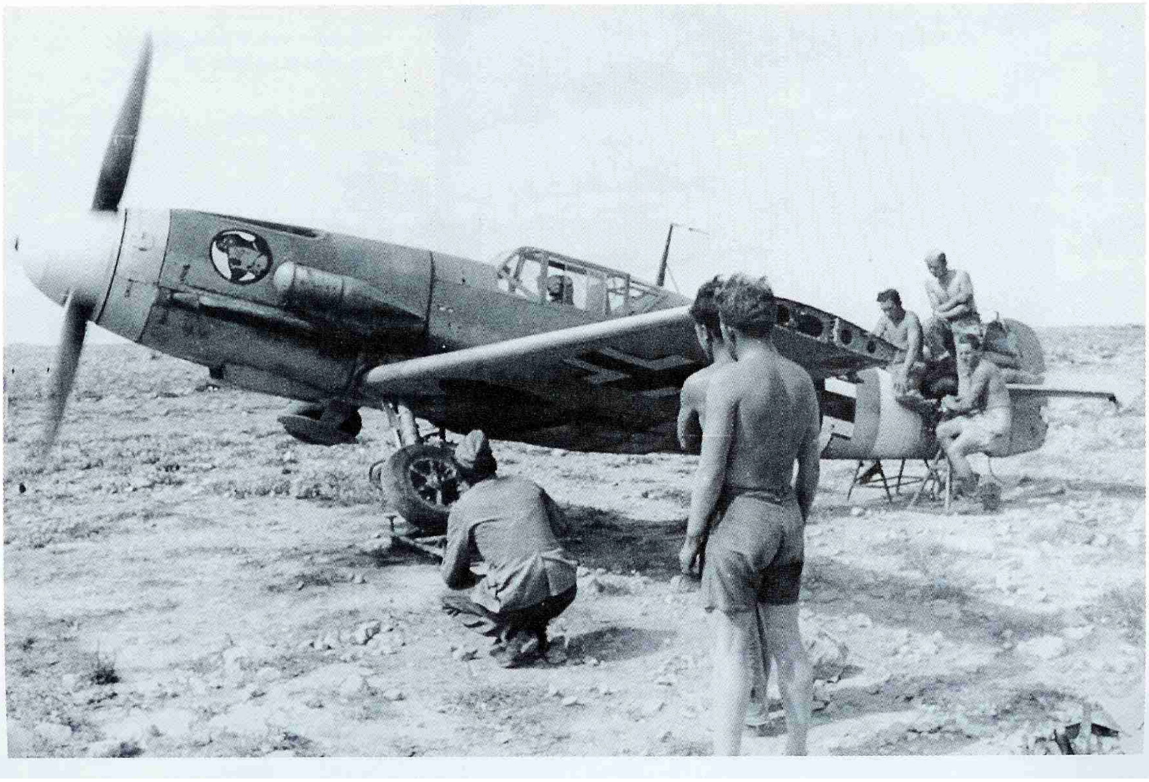
LEFT: Axis tanks advancing over open desert. By June 1942, Rommel's army had few remaining tanks and was facing problems in supplying them with fuel.

RIGHT: Generalfeldmarschall Albert Kesselring, left, C-in-C South and officer commanding Luftflotte 2, meets Generalfeldmarschall Rommel.

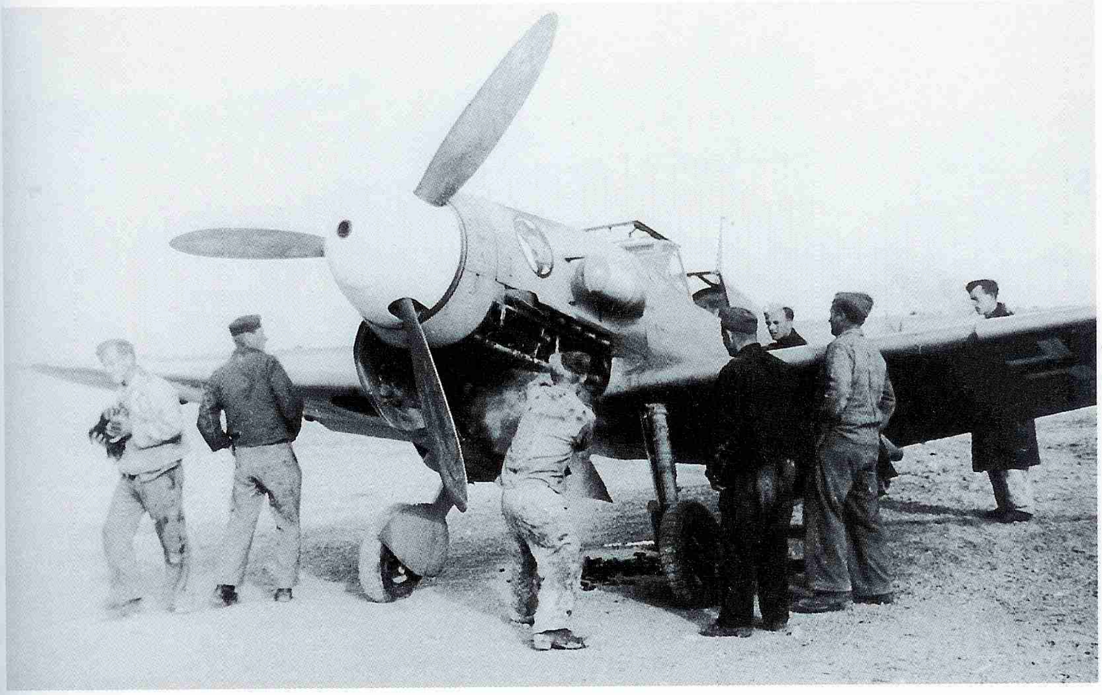




ABOVE AND RIGHT: 'Yellow 2' of 9./JG 27 was captured in good condition by Eighth Army's Indian Division at Derna in early 1942. It was later repaired and flown in British markings by 1 Sqn., SAAF.



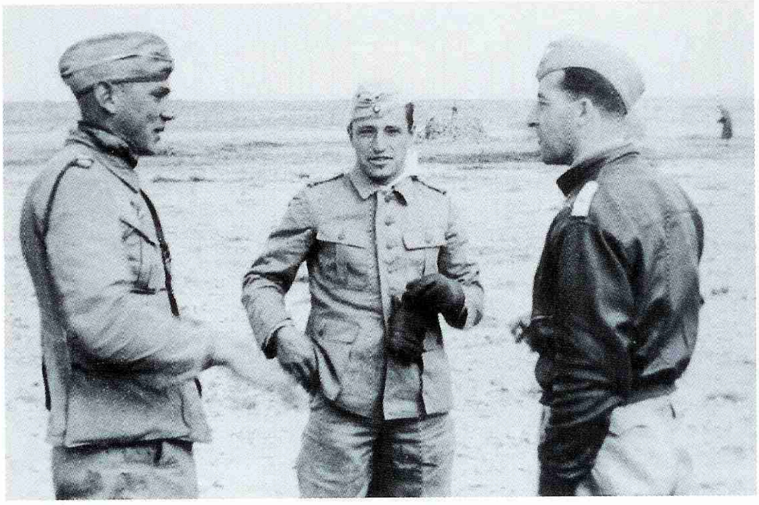
LEFT: Jacked up on trestles, a Bf 109 F undergoes undercarriage retraction tests, but a new wingtip will be required before the aircraft can be signed off as fully airworthy. In order to ensure that the machine does not nose over, sandbags have been placed on the horizontal tail surfaces and a number of ground crew provide added weight.



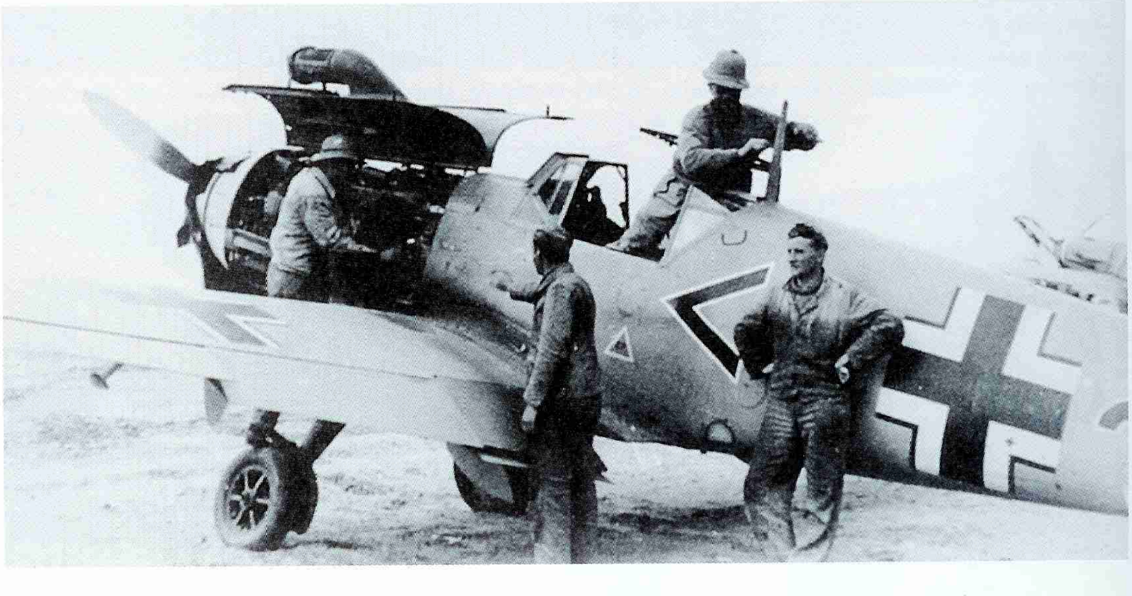
ABOVE: Ground staff watching as a mechanic cautiously opens the under cowling of a Bf 109 F-4 Trop of I./JG 27 at Martuba in February 1942. From the amount of smoke and oil, there appears to have been a problem with the oil cooler.

BELOW: Pictured at Martuba in 1942, Lt. Fhr. Karl von Lieres und Wilkau flew in North Africa with 2./JG 27 and claimed his first victory, a Hurricane south-south-west of El Adem, on 9 February. By the end of the African campaign, von Lieres had claimed 26 victories and continued to fly with JG 27 when it moved to the West for Defence of the Reich duties. He was later promoted to Oberleutnant and was Staffelführer of 3. Staffel when he was killed by fighters over France, north-west of Poix, on 11 June 1943. He received the Deutsches Kreuz in Gold posthumously on 12 July 1943.

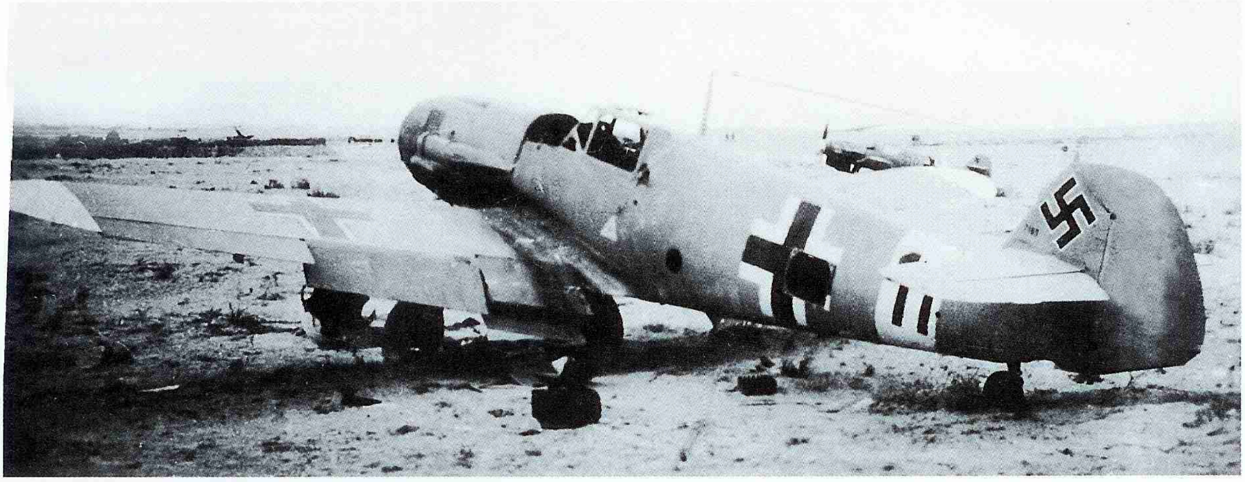
BELOW: Uffz. Max Winkler of 2./JG 27 at Martuba in 1942, in which year he claimed three victories; a Hurricane on 22 July, a Beaufighter on 19 August and a P-40 on 6 September. After the end of the North African campaign, Winkler flew in the Reichsverteidigung and claimed his 21st victory, a P-51, SW of Rheine on 31 December 1944. The next day he was promoted to Leutnant and received the Deutsches Kreuz in Gold. Winkler survived the war, finally becoming an Oberleutnant. All 21 of his victories were claimed while he was with JG 27 and included six four-engined bombers.



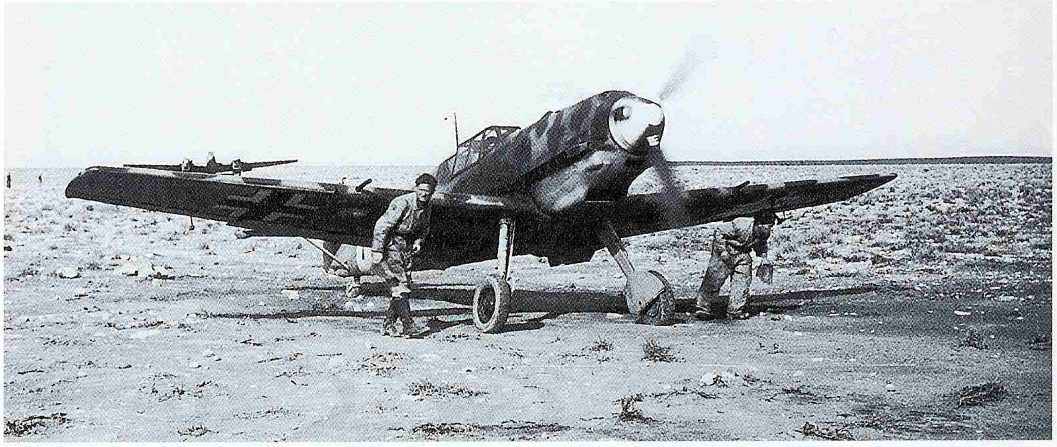
LEFT: Three pilots of 2./JG 27 at Martuba in February 1942: from the left, Lt. Friedrich Körner, Lt. Rudi Sinner and the Staffelkapitän, Oblt. Fritz Keller.

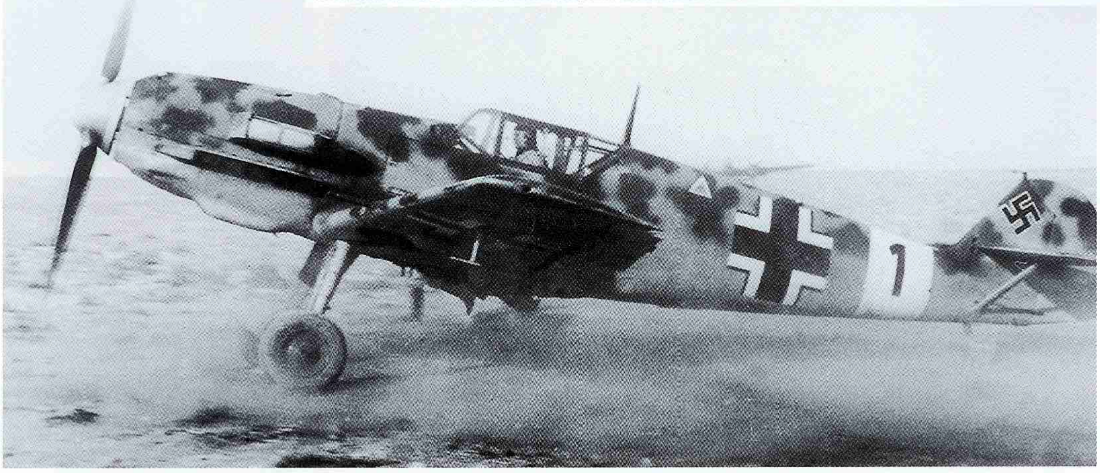


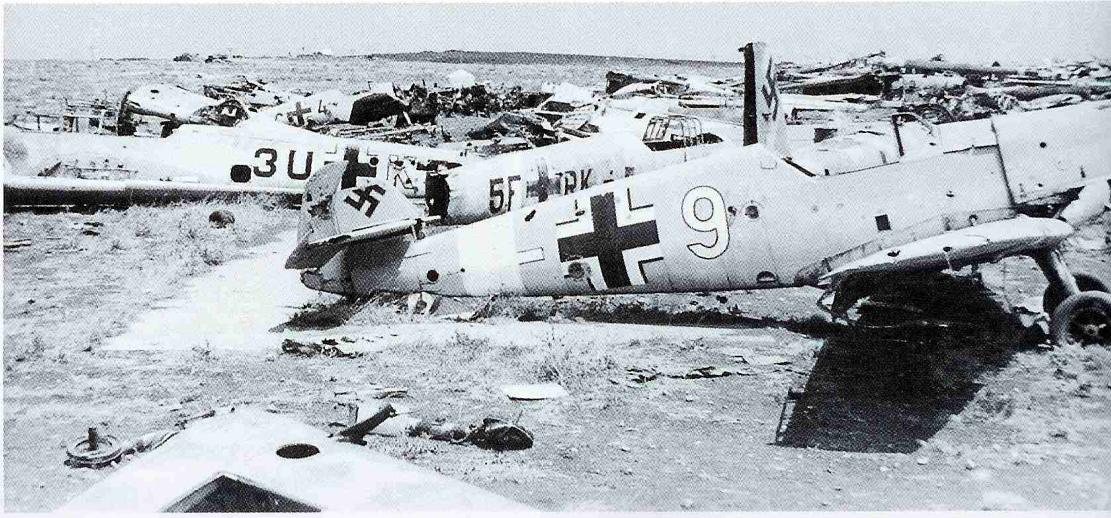
ABOVE: Technical personnel with the machine flown by the Gruppe Adjutant of III./JG 27, early 1942.



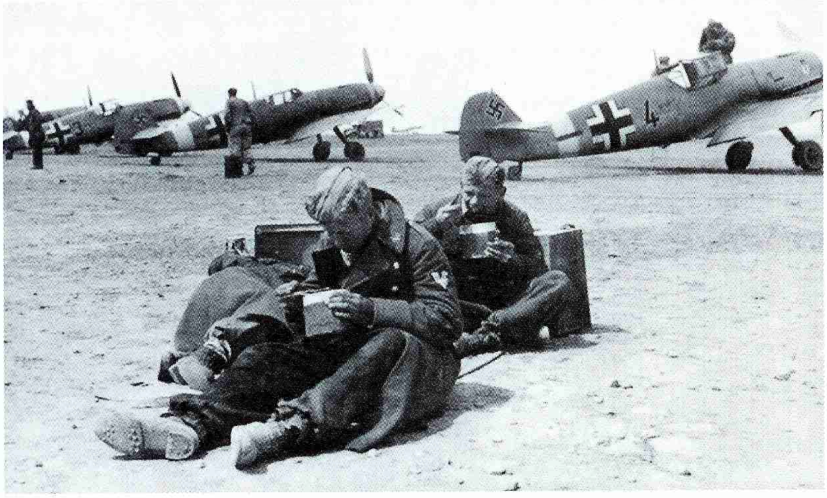
Besides fighter and Jabo units, the Bf 109 E and F were used in North Africa by some reconnaissance units. The abandoned Bf 109 F (*ABOVE*) served either with 2.(H)/14 or 4.(H)/12, the positioning of the aircraft code number 'Black 11' behind the fuselage Balkenkreuz being characteristic of these reconnaissance Staffeln. (*RIGHT AND BELOW*) The Bf 109 E 'Black 1' also carried its number painted in the same position over the white fuselage band.



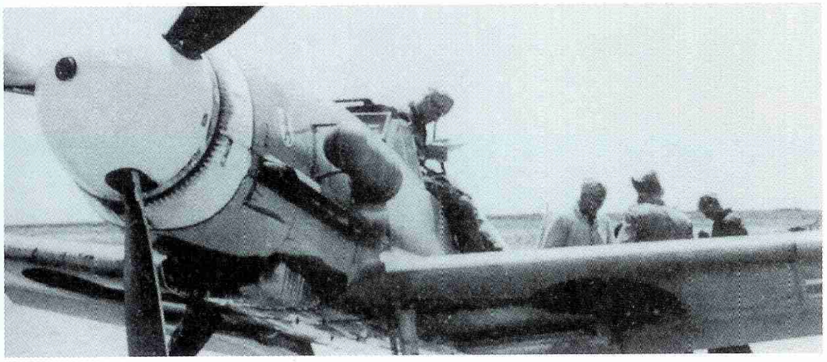


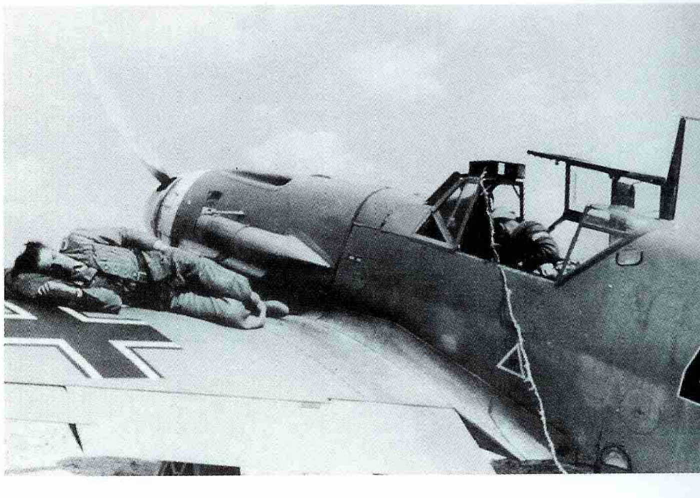


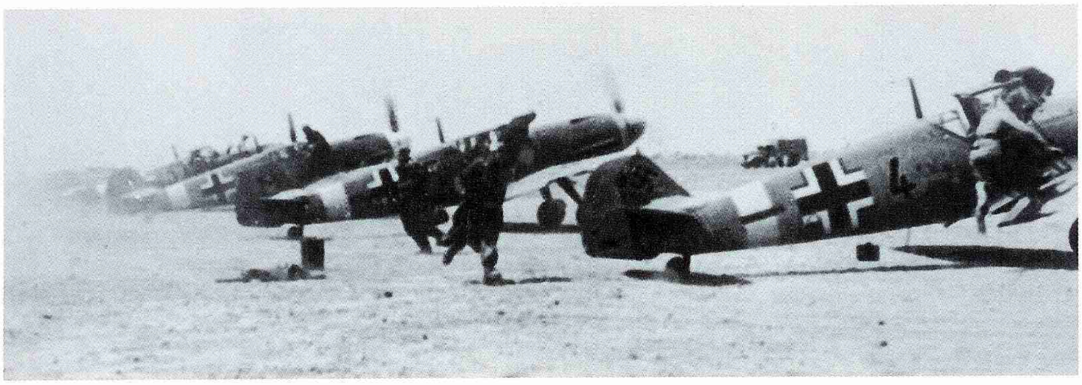
RIGHT: 'White 9' of 4./JG 27 on a captured airfield, probably at the end of 1941 or early 1942. Also seen is a Bf 110 from ZG 26 (with the unit code '3U'), with another belonging to 2.(H)/14 (unit code 5F), and a Bf 109 F-4 Trop, 'Black 4', of 8./JG 27 in the background. Aircraft graveyards were a common sight during the desert war as the attrition rate was extremely high due not only to combat damage but also severe maintenance problems.



Various views taken at Martuba in February 1942, mostly featuring 'Black 4', a Bf 109 F-4 Trop of 5./JG 27. Note *(CENTRE LEFT)* that oil has seeped from the joint between the spinner and the cowling and has been blown back by the slipstream giving the appearance of a narrow, serrated, black line Note also the heavy oil stain around oil cooler intake under the nose. The pilot seated on the cockpit sill is believed to be Lt. Kurt Jenisch, and *(BELOW)* the object resting on the windscreen is a field telephone.



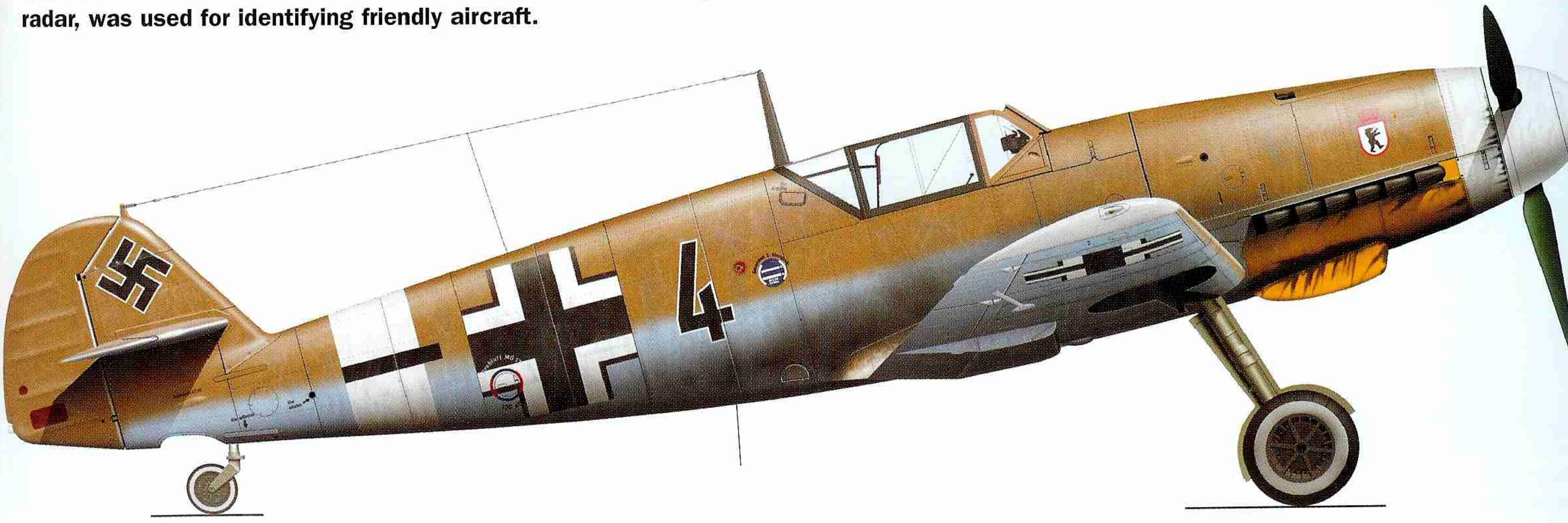


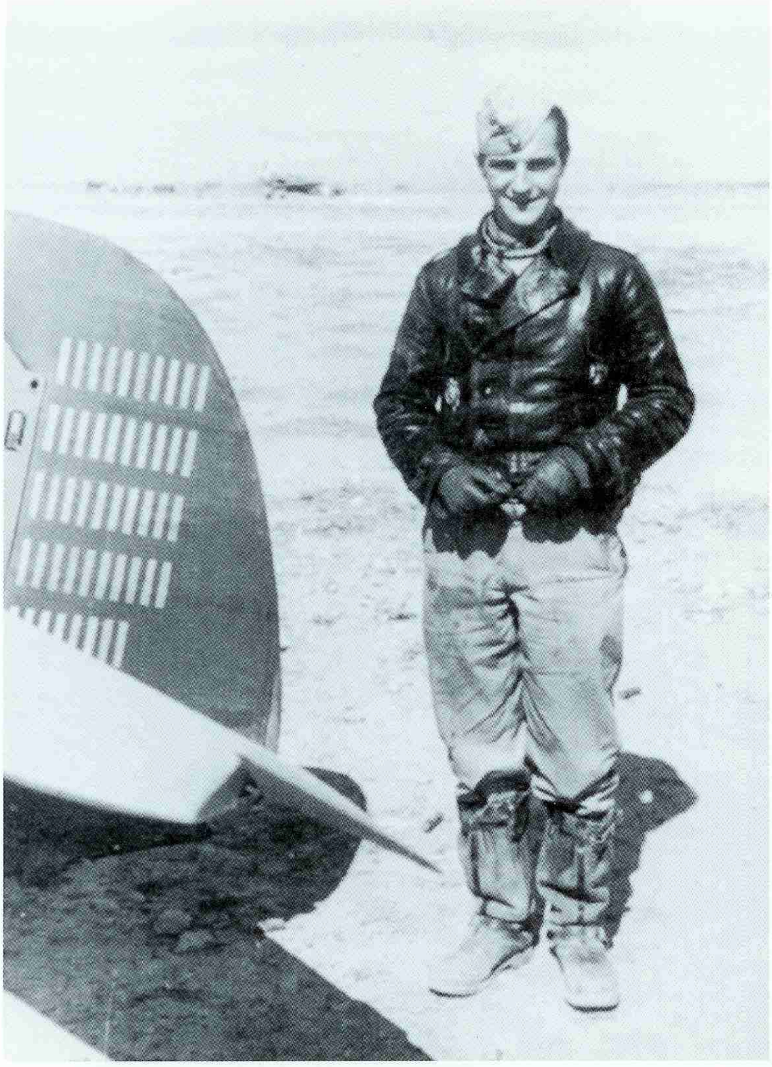


LEFT: 'Alarmstart' – it is not known whether this scene is genuine or merely staged for propaganda purposes. Note 'Black 4' in the foreground.

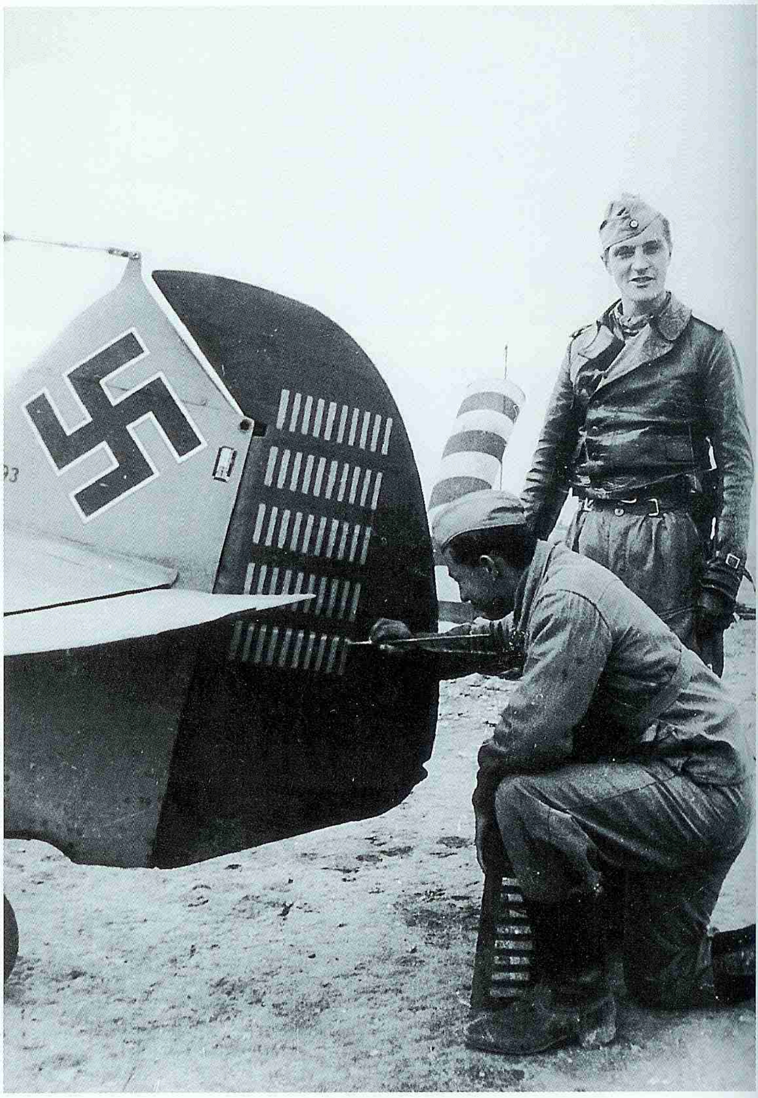
Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 Trop of 5./JG 27, Martuba, February 1942

Finished in a standard, factory-applied, mid-demarcation scheme of 79 Sand Yellow over Light Blue 78, this aircraft shows signs of a leaking oil cooler. This feature has been observed on a number of Bf 109 Fs operating in the Western Desert and seems to have occurred more frequently in this theatre than in Russia or on the Channel Front. The canopy framing on this aircraft is believed to have been Grey 74. Note the additional antenna mounted beneath the fuselage for the internally mounted FuG 25 equipment which, together with ground radar, was used for identifying friendly aircraft.



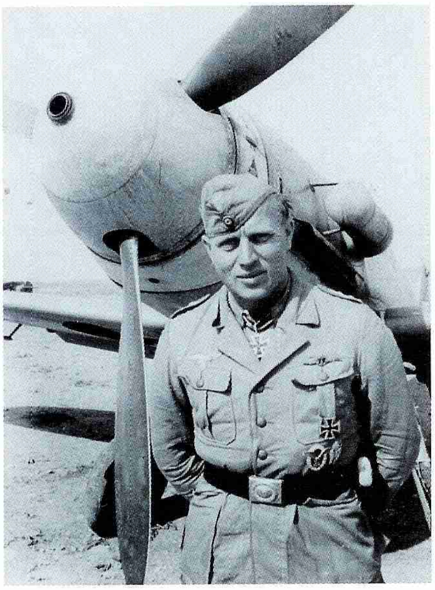


ABOVE: Lt. Hans-Joachim Marseille posing with his Bf 109 F-4/Z Trop, W. Nr. 8693, at Martuba. The red primer finish rudder carries 48 yellow bars, the last two representing two P-40s claimed on 15 February 1942 south-west of Gambut. The 'Z' in the aircraft's designation indicates that GM1 boost equipment was fitted.



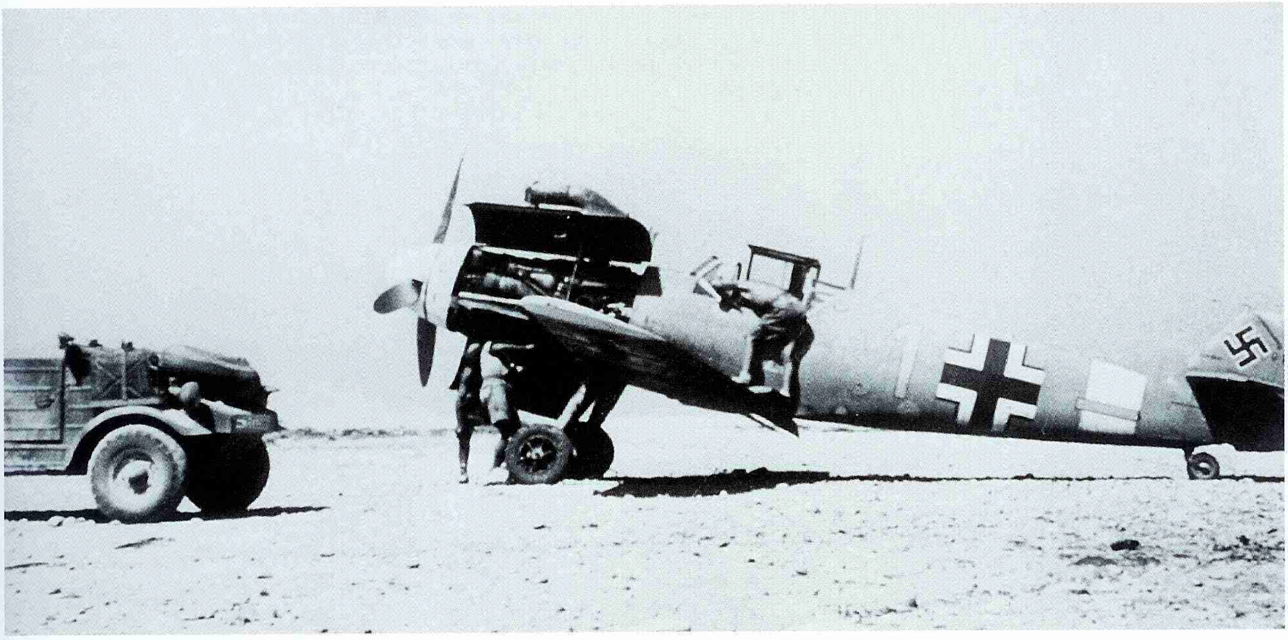
ABOVE: On 21 February 1942, Lt. Marseille shot down his 49th and 50th victories, both Curtiss P-40s over Fort Acroma, for which he qualified for the Ritterkreuz. Here, these two victories are being added to the rudder of Marseille's aircraft.

ABOVE AND RIGHT: The next day Marseille was awarded the Ritterkreuz and about this time was promoted to Oberleutnant. At noon on 27 February, Marseille claimed two more P-40s destroyed and thus had a total of 52 victories when these photographs were taken.



LEFT: Ofw. Otto Schulz received the Ritterkreuz after his 44th victory on 22 February 1942. He was killed in action on 17 June 1942, a day of particularly intense aerial activity in North Africa when four Bf 109s from II./JG 27 on a freie Jagd mission joined in an air battle near Sidi-Rezegh involving nine Boston bombers accompanied by a reported 30 escort fighters. Schulz attacked and shot down a Hurricane, his 51st victory, which he saw crash-land, and was engaged in strafing his victim on the ground when he was himself attacked by a Kittyhawk and killed.

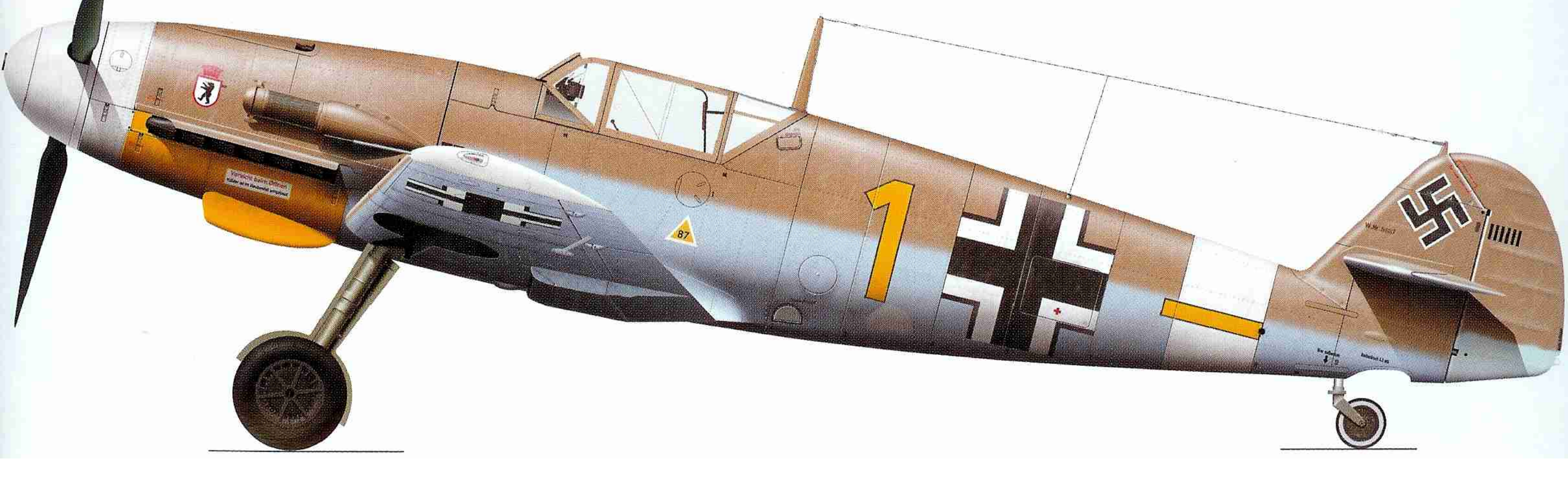
RIGHT: Gustav Rödel first saw combat in Spain but achieved his first victory in Poland. He then flew in France and against Britain as Staffelkapitän of 4./JG 27 before being posted to North Africa. He received the Ritterkreuz on 22 June 1941 after 20 victories and became Kommandeur of II./JG 27 on 20 May 1942. He later took command of the Geschwader, becoming Kommodore on 22 April 1943, and was awarded the Oak Leaves on 20 June 1943. This photograph shows Rödel shortly after receiving the Ritterkreuz.



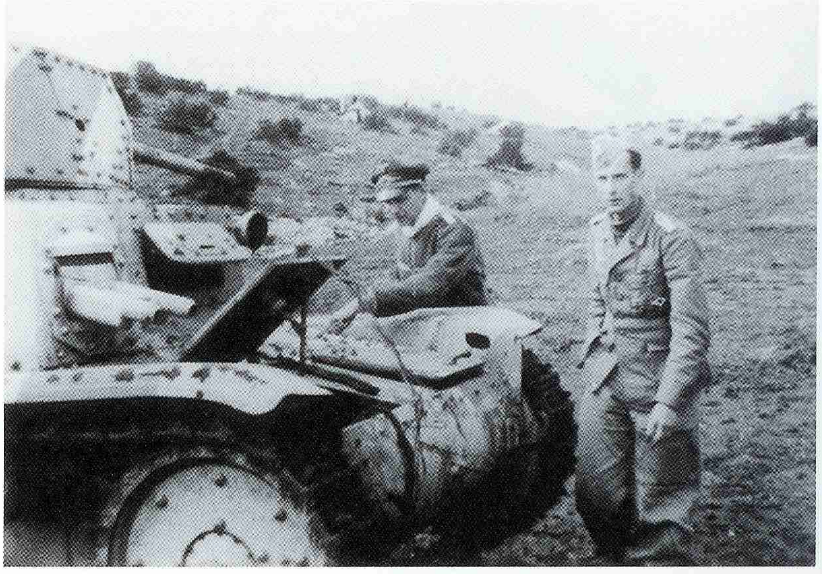
LEFT: After flying with 2./JG 27 as a Leutnant, Rudolf Sinner was promoted to Oberleutnant and became part of the Stab of I./JG 27. On 4 June 1942, Oblt. Sinner became Staffelkapitän of 6./JG 27 and flew 160 sorties in this Bf 109 F-4 Trop coded 'Yellow 1'. The photograph shows Oblt. Sinner's aircraft at Tmimi later in June. On 24 June, having since moved up to the airfield at Menistir, Oblt. Sinner shot down a Hurricane as his seventh victory.

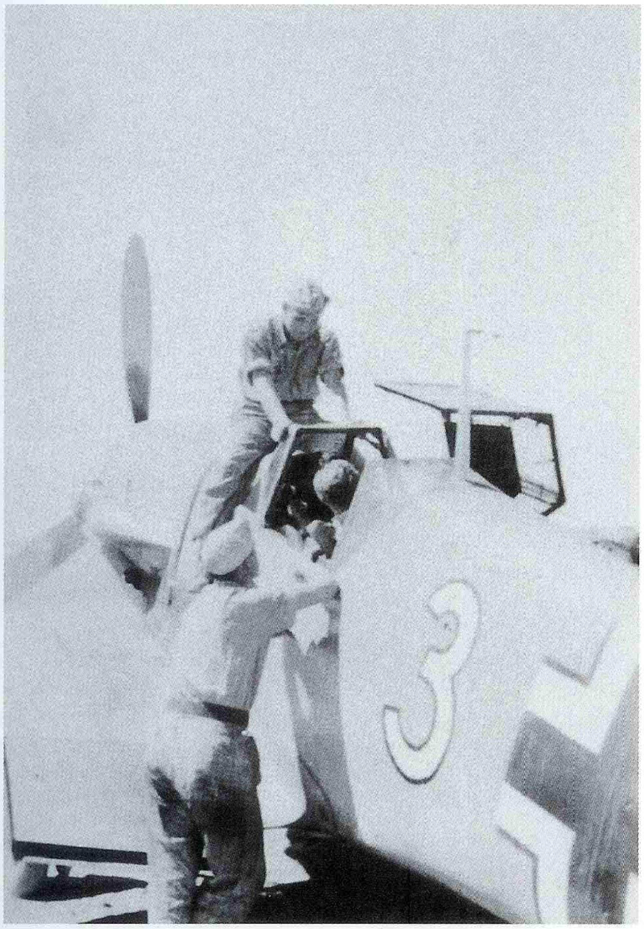
Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 Trop 'Yellow 1' flown by Oblt. Rudolf Sinner, Staffelkapitän of 6./JG 27, Tmimi, June 1942

This aircraft was finished in a mid-demarcation 78/79 scheme and was little weathered but showed signs of slight repairs to the fuselage and had been fitted with a replacement rudder, possibly due to airfield conditions rather than combat damage. The W.Nr. 8687 appeared on the tail and the rudder carried six black bars representing Sinner's Abschuss tally, the sixth being a P-40 destroyed on 30 May when Sinner was flying with Stab I./JG 27.

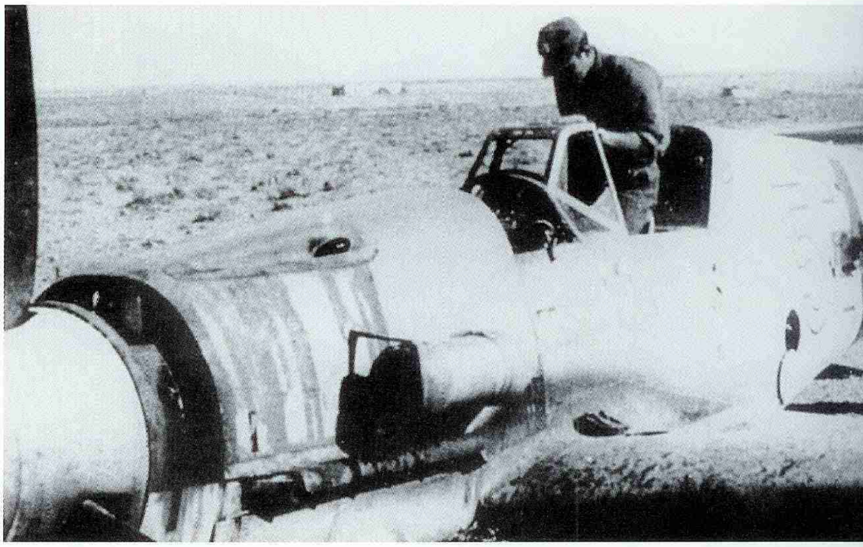


RIGHT: Oblt. Hermann Tangerding became Staffelkapitän of 7./JG 27 in December 1941 and destroyed his 11th and final victim, a P-40, over El Adem on 27 February 1942. Here, Tangerding is seen inspecting an Italian M13/40 medium tank at Martuba. He led the 7. Staffel until shot down by anti-aircraft fire and killed south of El Alumni on 31 August 1942. The identity of the man to the right is unknown.

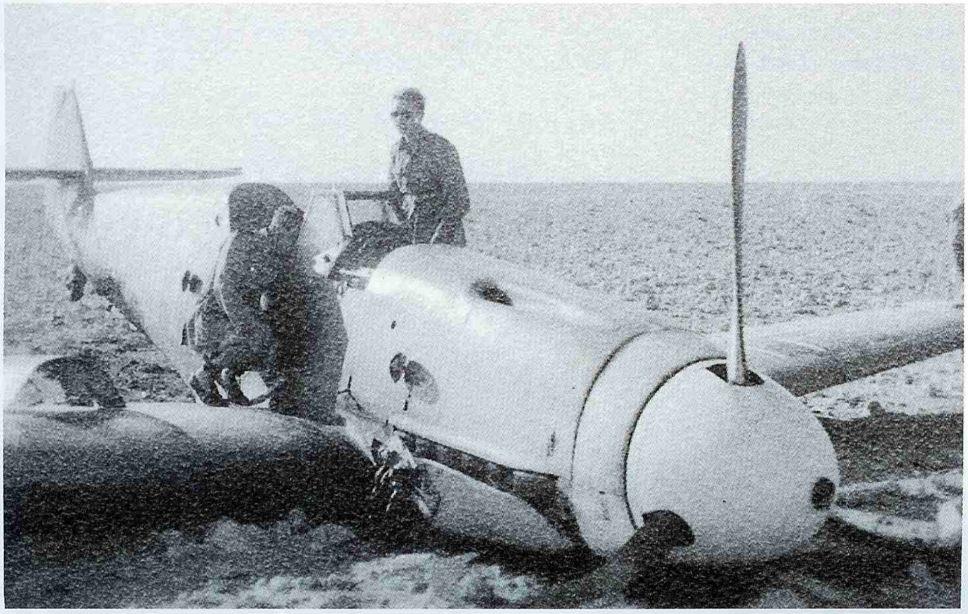




LEFT: A Bf 109 F-4 Trop, 'White 3' of I./JG 27. It has been observed that the style of number is unusual for I. Gruppe and may indicate the aircraft has been transferred from another Gruppe. The camouflage scheme consists of sand uppersurfaces with mid-demarcation, but tonal values between the sand and the undersurface blue makes the demarcation line almost indistinguishable.

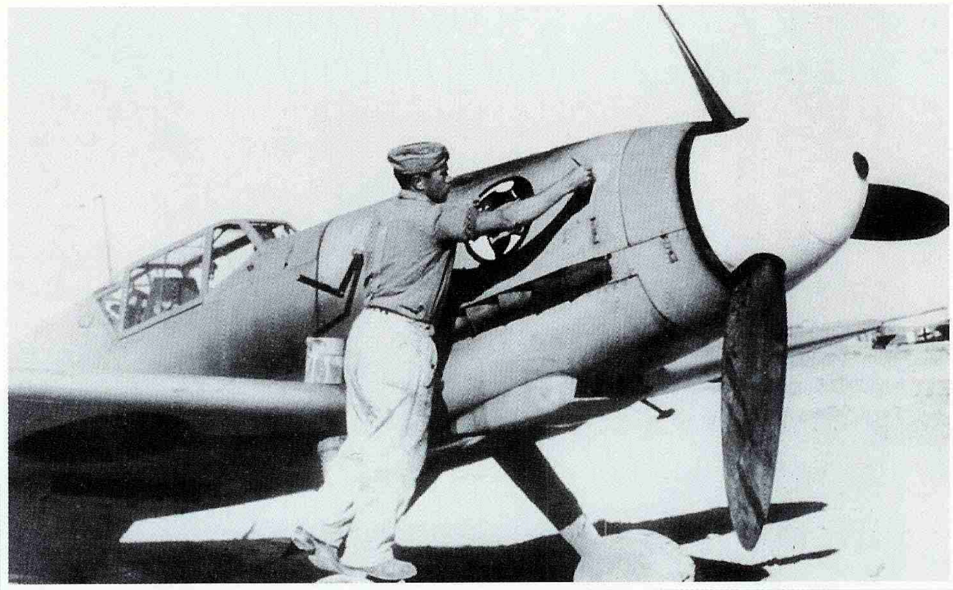


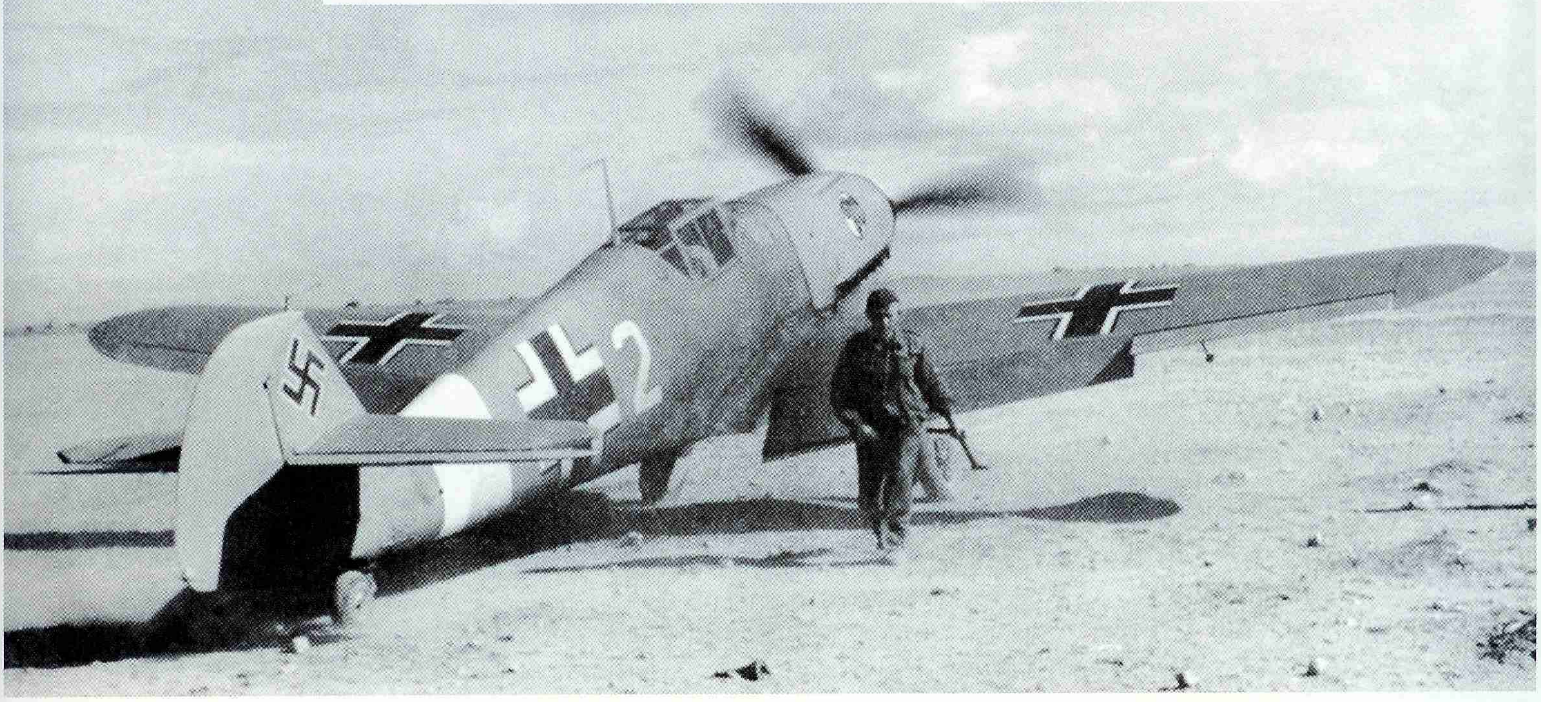
ABOVE: This crash-landed Bf 109 F-4 Trop, coded 'Yellow 5', belonged to 9./JG 27 and is believed to have been photographed in mid-1942. Here, the aircraft is being examined by Luftwaffe technical personnel who discovered it had suffered only slight damage. A salvage team later replaced the engine and propeller and the aircraft was returned to service.



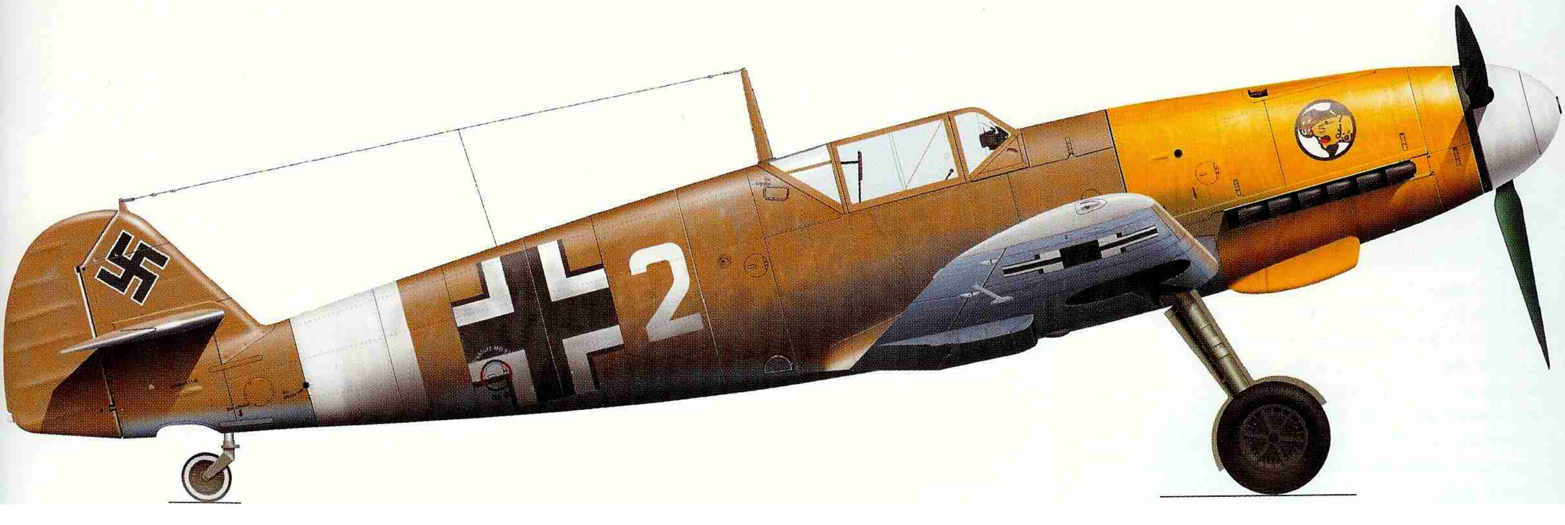
LEFT: Another Bf 109 F-4 Trop which crash-landed in the desert was this 'White 11'.

The completely yellow engine cowling, used as a recognition aid by Bf 109 Es in North Africa, was retained by some of the later Bf 109 Fs, as is evident from these views of a mechanic preparing an aircraft of I./JG 27 for its next sortie *(RIGHT)* and *(BELOW)* after starting the engine.

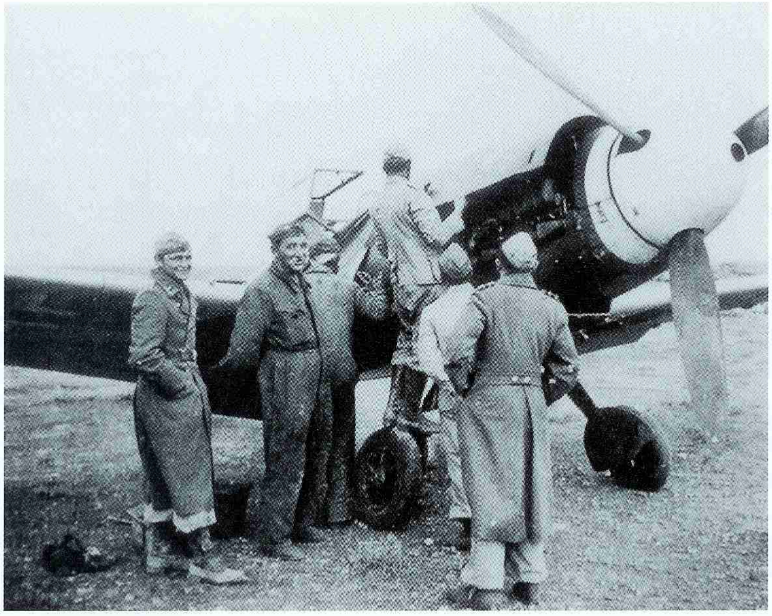




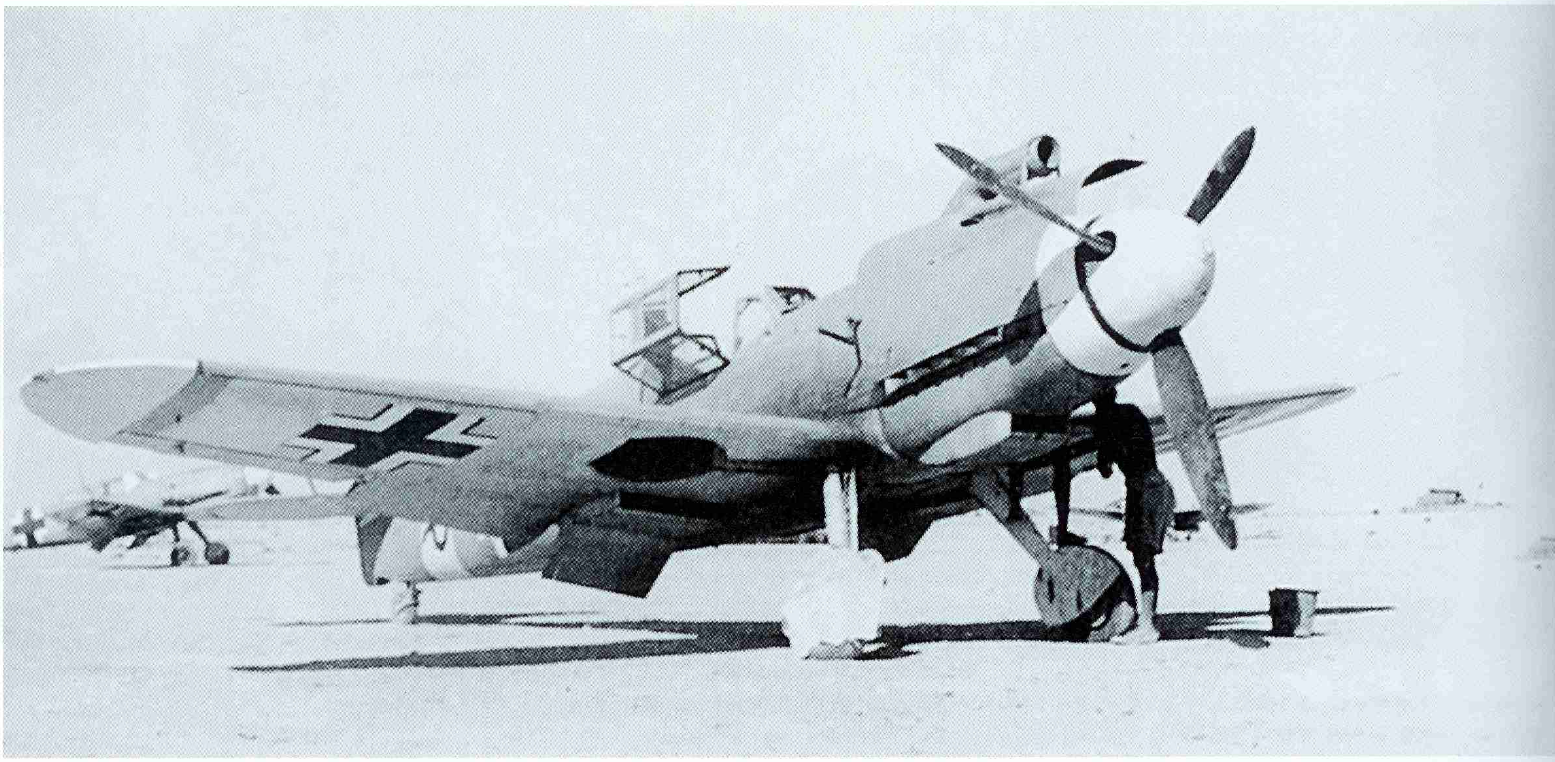
Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 Trop 'White 2' of 1./JG 27, North Africa, Summer 1942.
This aircraft is finished in a standard low-demarcation 79/78 desert scheme with an all-yellow cowling, but in this case, the white on the spinner has not been extended back to the first panel line on the engine cowling.



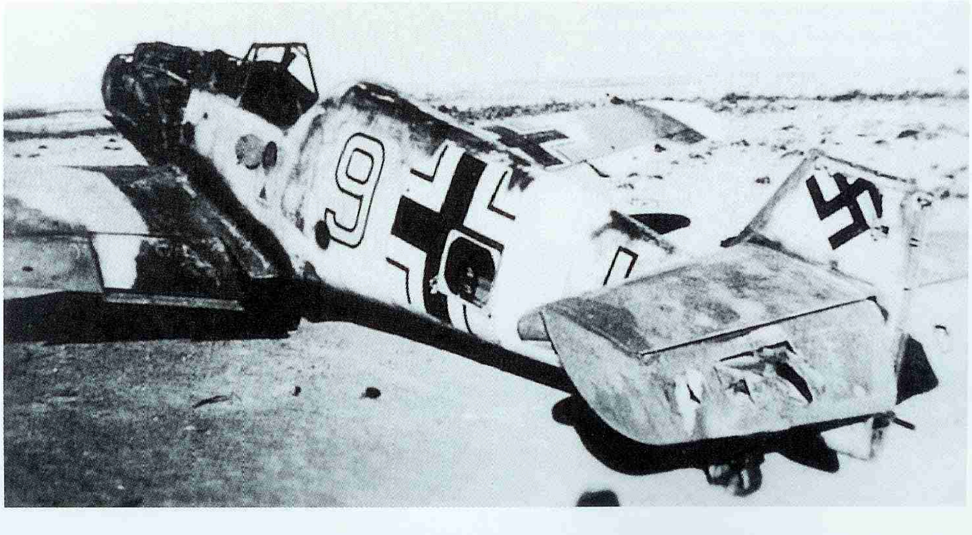
RIGHT: On this aircraft, the white ring around the engine cowling is unusual in that it is only two-thirds of the normal width and does not extend back to the first panel joint. To judge from the warm clothing worn by the two visitors watching the technical personnel working on this machine, this photograph was probably taken early in 1942.

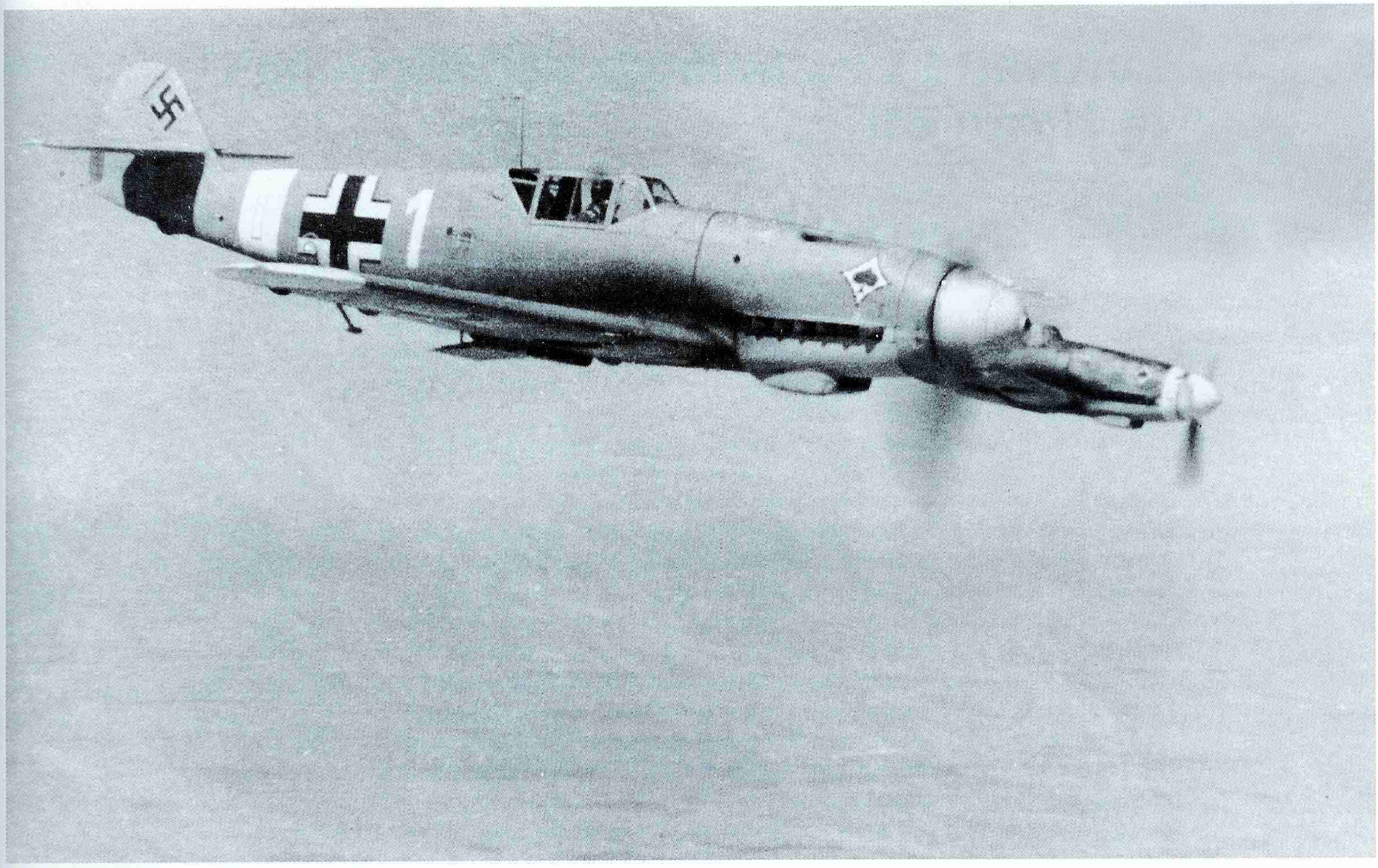


BELOW: A Bf 109 F-4 Trop of 8./JG 27 at El Asala in July 1942. Note that while the majority of F-4s came off the production lines with round wheel wells, this aircraft has the later, squared-off type also seen on some Bf 109 F-2s.



RIGHT: The III./JG 53 achieved little in North Africa before withdrawing to Sicily. All its equipment was left behind and its aircraft were either destroyed on the ground to prevent them falling intact into enemy hands or were handed over to JG 27. Little is known of this Bf 109, 'Yellow 9' found abandoned in North Africa, but on the original print a W.Nr., possibly 12564, appears on the tail and the machine is believed to have been flown by 9./JG 53. Of particular interest is the 74/75 European camouflage which has been modified with the addition of a third, much darker colour, around the wing root.

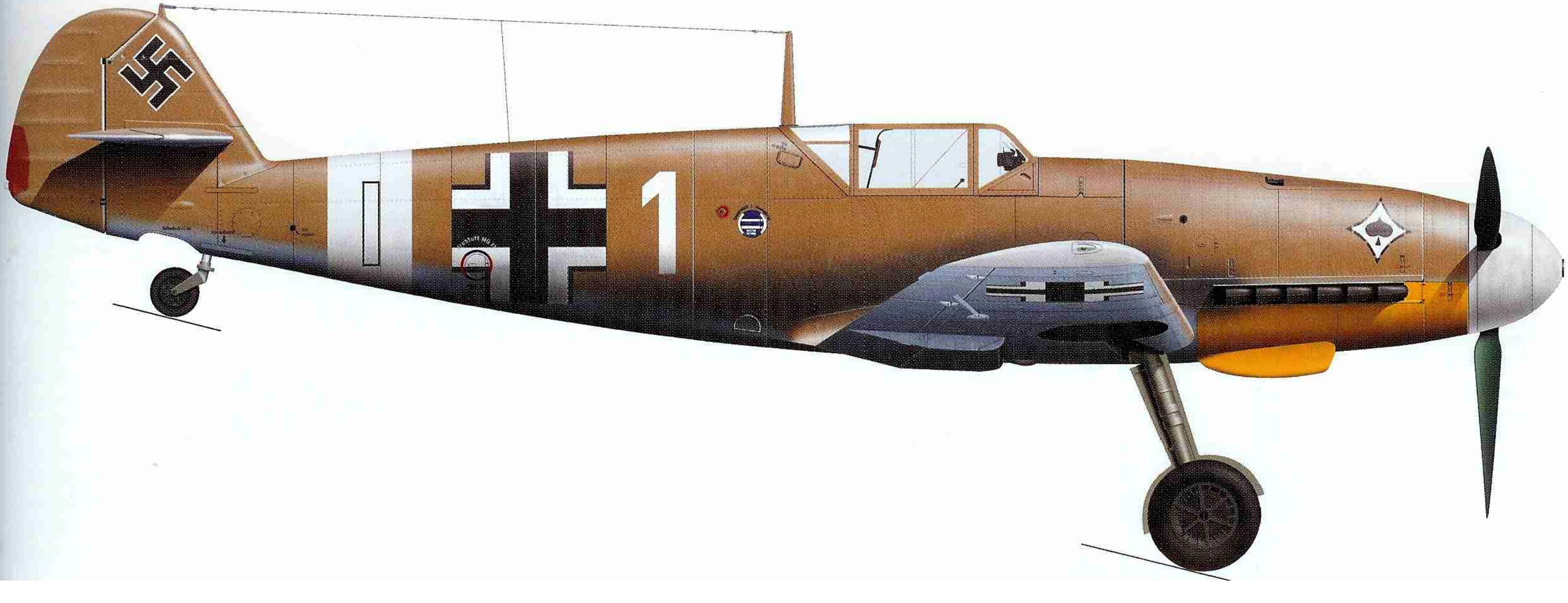




ABOVE: The III./JG 53 was ordered to North Africa to support JG 27 and this Bf 109 F-4, 'White 1', is believed to have been W.Nr. 7348 flown by the Staffelkapitän of 7./JG 53, Oblt. Heinz Altendorf. On 16 December 1941, Altendorf and his wingman, Gefr. Hartmut Klötzer, were strafing British armour near Mechili when both aircraft were hit by ground fire. Klötzer succeeded in turning away in the direction of his own lines but was unable to return to his base and eventually made a successful crash-landing in the desert. After a day's march he was picked up by an armoured car and returned to his lines. Altendorf also crash-landed but came down close to British tanks and was taken prisoner. Soon afterwards, the Gruppe left North Africa and transferred to Sicily to begin operations against Malta.

Messerschmitt Bf 109 F-4 'White 1' of 7./JG 53, December 1941

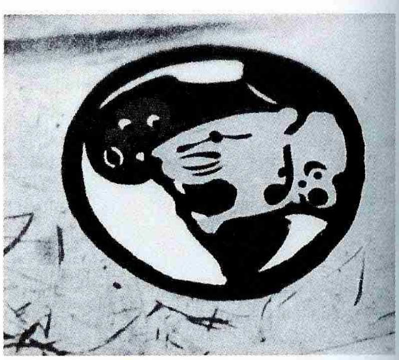
This aircraft, possibly W.Nr. 7348, was finished in a standard low-demarcation 79/78 scheme with a white spinner and, although it lacks the usual white forward nose section, had a white fuselage band upon which was superimposed a black outline-style vertical III. Gruppe bar. Note that the 'Pik As' badge of JG 53 has been applied at a slight angle and that apart from heavy exhaust staining, the machine has a fairly clean appearance.



Luftwaffe Camouflage and Markings in North Africa

When 7./JG 26 was despatched to Sicily in February 1941, its aircraft retained their European camouflage and markings which, as previously recorded in this series, consisted of a splinter pattern on the wing uppersurfaces and top of the fuselage, either in RLM 02 Grey and Green 71 or a series of unofficial grey shades introduced at unit level. In each case, the undersurfaces were Blue 65 with the fuselage sides invariably mottled in one or more of the greys. This *Staffel's* aircraft also retained the bright RLM 04 Yellow engine cowlings and rudders first introduced during the Battle of Britain, with the unit's 'Red Heart' badge superimposed above the exhausts. Identification numbers were carried forward of the fuselage *Balkenkreuz* with the III. *Gruppe* bar aft, both painted white and edged in black.

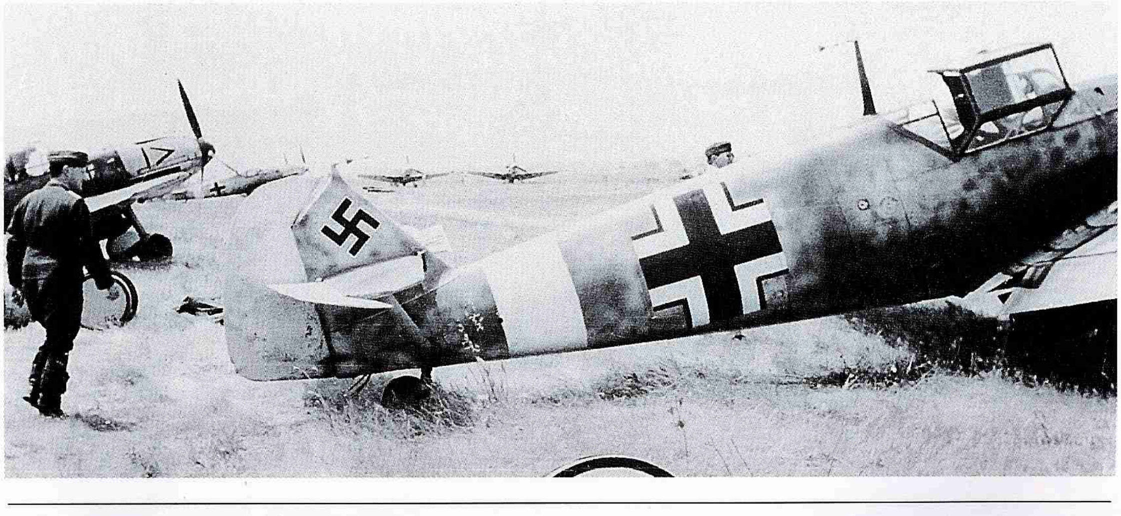
The first Bf 109 Es of I./JG 27 to arrive in North Africa in mid-April 1941 also retained a European camouflage. The aircraft of the *Gruppe Stab* carried the familiar black symbols edged in white forward of the fuselage *Balkenkreuz* while the three *Staffeln* sported fuselage numbers in the usual colours; white for 1. *Staffel*, black edged in red for 2. *Staffel* and yellow for 3. *Staffel*. All aircraft carried the unit badge, first adopted during the Spring of 1940, comprising a leopard menacing a Negro's head superimposed over a map of Africa. Despite this badge, it seems to have been merely coincidental that this *Gruppe* was subsequently chosen as the first to go to Africa, but certainly the pilots looked upon this coincidence as being a good omen. It may be remembered [1] that in late 1939, the aircraft of 2./JG 27 had been painted to commemorate the old German colonies lost after the end of the First World War, but these commemorative names seem to have disappeared by the time the *Staffel* transferred to North Africa.



ABOVE: The badge of I./JG 27 was devised in the Spring of 1940, well before the unit went to North Africa.

In May 1941, III./JG 27 made a temporary appearance in Sicily and, having previously been operating in the Balkans, its aircraft also retained their European colours. *Stab* symbols or *Staffel* numbers were painted on the engine cowlings, a practice which originated in I./JG 1 and from which the unit had been formed in May 1940. The *Gruppe* then went to Russia before finally re-appearing in North Africa in December 1941.

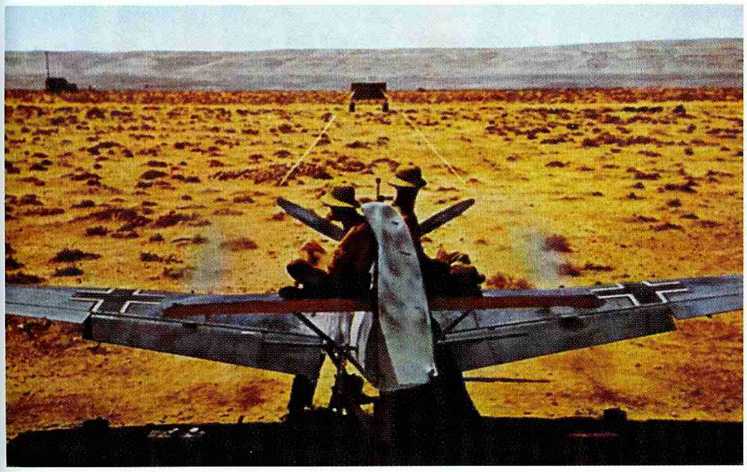
It soon became obvious that the European camouflage colours were totally inappropriate against the desert terrain in North Africa and that a new camouflage scheme was urgently required. At this time, some of I./JG 27's Bf 109 Es in transit to North Africa were repainted with their uppersurfaces finished in a sandy yellow oversprayed with a brownish green mottle and with their undersurfaces finished in a blue, darker than RLM 65. However, no official *Luftwaffe* paints were available to provide the necessary colours and the long-held opinion is that these early desert colours, certainly the sand and blue, were most probably Italian Air Force paints as they began to appear quite quickly, whereas the normal RLM processes for introducing paints was usually quite lengthy. The Italians would have been a logical source as they had several years' experience with tropical colours based on their



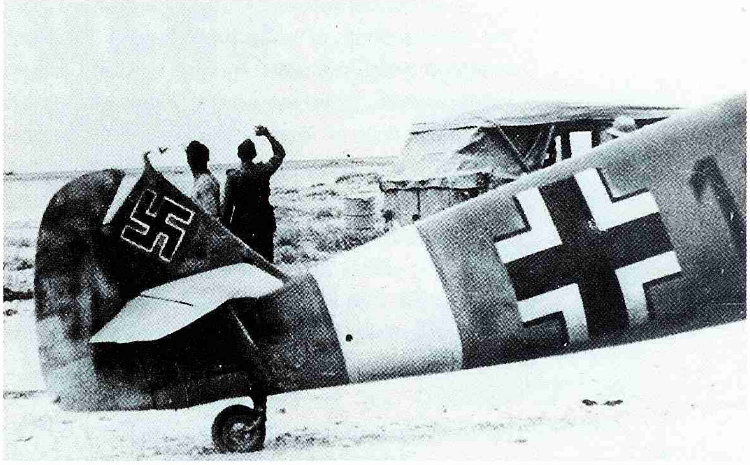
RIGHT: As was normal for aircraft operating from Sicily, European camouflage colours were retained. These aircraft belonged to III./JG 27.

---

[1] See Volume 1, Section 4, Page 313.



ABOVE: Repainting aircraft with an entirely new camouflage scheme could not be done under field conditions in North Africa. Consequently, some aircraft retained the European finish for some time and there is evidence to suggest that, as the repainting process was so slow, some aircraft were never repainted in desert colours. This photograph of an aircraft seen undergoing armament harmonisation, illustrates just how unsuitable the European finish was in the desert.



ABOVE: Theatre markings adopted by Luftwaffe aircraft operating in North Africa were based on those already in use as a recognition aid by the Italian Air Force and consisted of a white band around the rear fuselage.

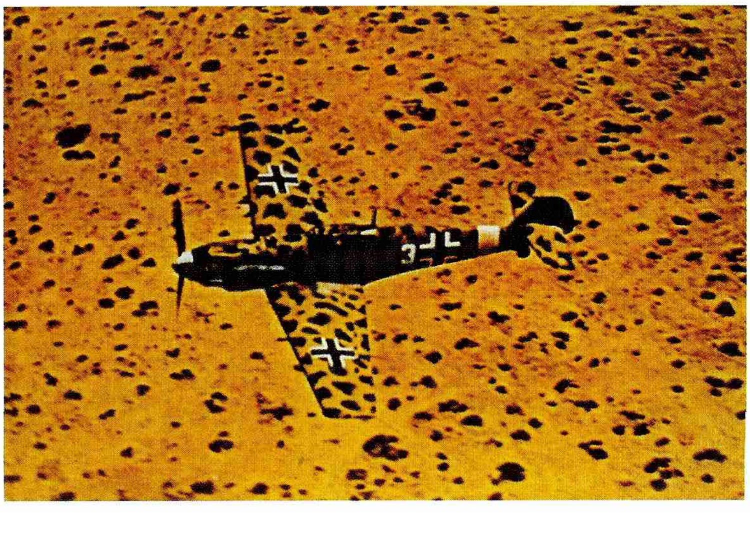
colonial holdings in North Africa. However this is still only a probability which remains to be proved but, if the paints were from Italian stock, access to them would only have been possible via official channels because of the quantities required, even for only a few aircraft. The actual colours varied slightly between the Italian manufacturing companies because their controls were not as strict as those applied by the RLM.

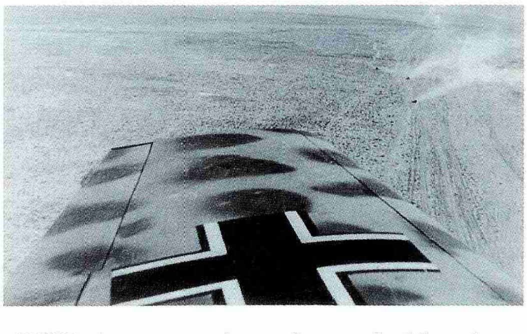
Surprisingly, however, although contemporary colour photos show that this new scheme was highly effective, it was not adopted as a standard tropical scheme and relatively few aircraft appear to have been finished in this way. Instead, the mottled scheme began to give way to an overall sand camouflage colour on the uppersurfaces, probably again one of the Italian colours already in use. Regarding the Bf 109, the use of Italian colours was applied solely to the E series and remained in use for only about two or, at the most three months. There is good circumstantial evidence to suggest that the repainting of the Bf 109s was carried out in Sicily where a number of permanent Italian bases and maintenance depots had been placed at the disposal of the *Luftwaffe*.

Meanwhile, the RLM had, given the German paint testing routine, quickly developed its own tropical colours and the Italian paints were replaced by new RLM colours known as 78 *Hellblau* (Light Blue) 79 *Sandgelb* (Sand Yellow) and 80 *Olivgrün* (Olive Green). Once these new colours were available, aircraft being modified to *Trop* configuration were resprayed 79 and 78, but there seems to be no evidence that Olive Green 80 was ever added at point of manufacture. If it was done at all, then it was at a repair or overhaul facility.

These new colours were certainly available by August 1942 when II./JG 27 was withdrawn from the Russian Front and re-equipped with new Bf 109 F-4 *Trops* at Döberitz in Germany for operations in North Africa. The positioning of the dividing line between the sand yellow uppersurfaces and the sky blue beneath varied, being either mid-way down the fuselage sides or covering the whole of that surface. Photographic evidence, supported by a check against *Werknummern*, suggests both demarcation variants were in use at the same time and it is believed differences were due only to constructor's choice.

RIGHT: The early desert camouflage carried by the machines of I./JG 27, shown in this photograph of 'White 3' flying over a flat, sandy area dotted with camel-thorn bushes, was very effective. Aircraft arriving later in North Africa were camouflaged on their uppersurfaces only in an overall sand colour and lacked the green mottles. This applied to some Bf 109 Es and certainly all Bf 109 Fs operating in North Africa.

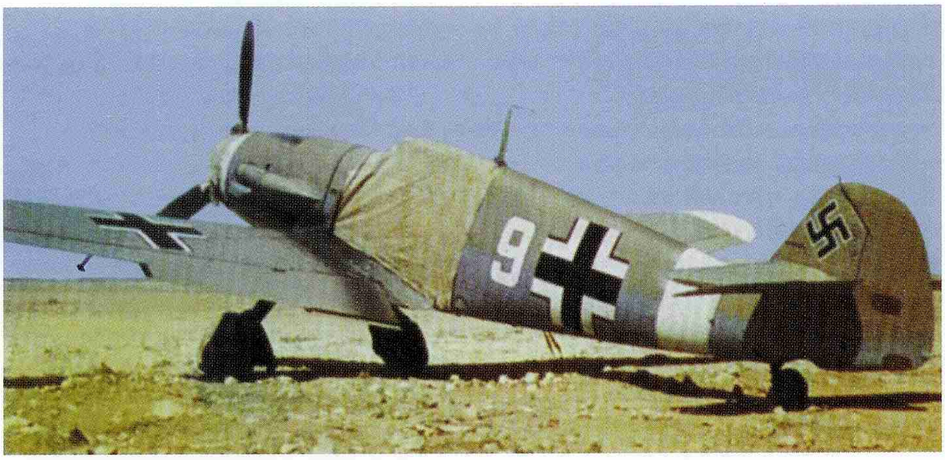




ABOVE: A transport column, photographed from the cockpit of a Bf 109 E, raises the dust. Of interest is the appearance of the green mottles which suggest that, the painter leaned over the leading and trailing edges of the wing to apply them as the edges show that the spray gun was held at an angle to the wing surface and not at the prescribed 90 degrees.

Also concurrent with the arrival of the *'Friedrich'*, as the Bf 109 F variant was familiarly known, was the introduction of extended theatre and recognition markings. In addition to the existing white fuselage band, the spinner, wing tips and later the forward section of the engine cowling, were usually painted white, while the undersurfaces of the engine cowling - and sometimes the entire cowling - were painted yellow, a feature adopted by most German aircraft whether operating in North Africa, the Western Front or in Russia. When III./JG 27 left the Russian Front and returned to its home base at Döberitz to convert to the Bf 109 F before transferring to North Africa, in December 1941, its aircraft were already factory-finished in the Sand 79 and Blue 78 scheme, to which were later added the same white and yellow areas as already described.

The Bf 109 Fs of JG 53 which arrived in Sicily in late 1941 generally arrived in a factory applied splinter pattern of Dark Grey 74 and Medium Grey 75 on the wings with the fuselage sides mottled in a combination of RLM 02, 74 and 75 over Light Blue 76 undersurfaces. As normal for *Luftwaffe* aircraft operating from Southern European bases, these aircraft carried a white rear fuselage band. The camouflage and markings of the Bf 109 F-4/B fighter-bombers of 10./JG 53 was similar to that carried by the remainder of the *Geschwader* except that the symbol of a bomb targeting a map of Malta was painted on the rear fuselage in place of the familiar *Gruppe* bar.



The true nature of the Sandgelb 79 and Hellblau 78 colours used by the Luftwaffe in North Africa is revealed in these colour photographs. *(BELOW)* The white segment on the spinner, the white fuselage band and the yellow under the cowling are absolutely typical of Bf 109 Fs operating in North Africa in late 1941 and during 1942. The only modification introduced to these colours and markings was that the spinners were later painted all white and a white band, extending back to the panel line immediately ahead of the exhausts, was added to the front of the engine cowling, as barely visible on 'White 9', *(LEFT)*. Note the low tonal value between the blue and the sand which, in monochrome photographs, sometimes makes it difficult to clearly recognise the demarcation line.